DELL
FIRST EDITION
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Matt Kirby was a doctor, not a gunslinger.
But this was a town where a man had to be both . . .

25¢

DOCTOR WITH A GUN

RICHARD FERBER

The minute
he saw
Emily Wilder,

Matt Kirby knew he was too late.
On her ashen, agonized face was mirrored
the fact that somewhere, inside,
the woman was bleeding to death.

"My husband . . ." she whispered painfully.
"Your husband what?" Matt asked urgently,
but Emily could no longer answer.

Then Matt noticed the bruise
on Emily's stomach, a bruise that only
a horse's hoof could have made.

He remembered now, just before
he had discovered Emily lying crumpled
on the ground, he had seen her husband
Brett Wilder riding drunkenly
away from the house.

He remembered the look of
black rage on Brett's face, and he knew
why Emily had died . . .

DOCTOR WITH A GUN

Richard Ferber

an original Western

A DELL FIRST EDITION

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Doctor With A Gun

1

The porch lantern was lit, and a few millers beat hysterically against the yellow glass. Matthew Kirby watched them with a feeling of ease and contentment. He glanced at Judith Balfour, a discreet distance away from him on the porch swing. She seemed especially beautiful tonight. Some perfume came from her long dark hair, and he found it exasperating. The scent was strangely like her personality: gentle and elusive and disturbing. One moment she could be so proper, and the next . . . ? Well, at least he'd had some suggestion.

He laughed and went back to watching the millers. He stretched his long legs out across the porch, feeling particularly self-satisfied. He was only thirty—he had never felt younger than he felt tonight—and there seemed so much to look forward to: Judith, a place in a town he loved, his profession. He put out a hand and touched her hair where it fell in a soft fold over her shoulder.

"That light," he said. "I've been here every night for six months, and it's always burning."

"That's not true," she said. "You know it isn't."

"Then turn it off."

She shook her head. "Father's still up. He'd wonder what happened."

"He could guess," Matt said. "He must have that much imagination, anyway."

She laughed. "He's probably mad enough already. Amy has been staying over with a friend in Cedar City and she was due back tonight. Now she's late."

"I wouldn't worry about your little sister," Matt said. "She can take care of herself."

"Oh? And what do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. She's got spunk, that's all. She wouldn't be afraid of turning off a light."

She moved away from him on the swing, stiffening in mock anger. "All right. Then you can just wait for her."

"No. I would, but she won't make it tonight. If you listen, you can hear the last train. It's already heading back down the valley."

The sound was barely audible in the moisture-heavy air of the mountains. Only its distance distinguished it from the mine engines that shuffled back and forth along the gorge. They worked throughout the night, screeching and straining, their noises like the noises of a cheap, bawdy carnival; they never quite touched the white houses and green lawns of the upper town. Matt wondered if Judith's father, from the remoteness of the great house, ever heard them.

The thought sobered him. He found her hand on the porch swing. "I only came here to talk, anyway. I saw Doc Marriott today."

"How's Emily? I meant to go down to see her this morning."

"She's fine," Matt said. Emily was Judith's older sister, and one of Doctor Marriott's patients. She had been married just over a year to Brett Wilder, a tall, pleasant southerner who had found a position with the Balfour mining firm. "Doc says she's got another month yet."

"I wish you were taking care of her, Matt."

"No. Doc's a good man. He's got a lot more experience. He's delivered every baby in this valley, and that includes me. And that's not what I wanted to talk about. Marriott's thinking about retiring. You know what it means."

She was no longer elusive. She met his eyes, not trying to shrink from what he meant, and it was one of the things he liked about her.

"He wants me to take over his practice," Matt went on. "Gradually, at first. But it would mean some money, for a change. We could get married."

She didn't say anything. It was the first time he had actually spoken the word, but they had always had an understanding.

"We wouldn't have to worry about that lantern, either," Matt said, standing up. She got up and stood beside him.

"And Father?"

"God, I'll have to talk to him," he said. "I know that. But not tonight. You said he was in a bad mood already. He won't take kindly to the thought of his prettiest daughter marrying a starving doctor."

"He's had plenty of time to get used to the idea."

"I'm a coward. Let's give him a little more."

She walked with him as far as the gate, outside of the circle of lamplight, and he kissed her. The big red gelding reached across the fence and nudged him, leaving a bran mark on the shoulder of his coat.

"There's always something," he said. There wouldn't be for long. He waited until Judith had gone back to the porch, and waved to her. The big gelding caught his mood. It went down the street at a sideways, high-headed trot, and he made no effort to stop it.

The land opened up as soon as he had left Colbyville. It ceased to be a gorge, and sloped away to a wide, level valley with high timbered mountains on all sides. There were plenty of relics all around of what the country had been like ten years before, when men were still panning for gold in the creek bottoms, or chipping at some promising piece of side hill. Most of them had given up and gone to work for the big operators in the gorge. Some had struck it rich and gone back to the city. A few still held out.

But most of the places were deserted: little rough-board shacks, and a miners' bunkhouse—two bits a night—that sat out in a lonely field with nothing but walls left standing, and a half dozen road ranches scattered across the valley. One of them was still running. A single lantern burned in the window and threw a little light out as far as the front yard. There were only two horses at the rack, and in the poor light there was nothing about

them to draw Matt's attention. But the gelding nickered when it got closer, and one of the animals pulled back and answered. Its black coat glistened then, and reminded Matt of Brett Wilder. He wasn't sure of the reason. Except that Wilder had a taste for fine horseflesh. And the animal at the rack was no typical back country pony. That was all. He didn't think about it any more once he had ridden by the place; he fell to wondering about Emily Wilder's baby. A month. He wished she would hurry. Certainly Judith wouldn't consent to marrying him until it was all over.

He turned off the main road and went a half mile along an old wagon trail. He turned again, skirting the fallen bridge, and letting the gelding take its time in the mud of the drying creek bed. The little house stood under the trees. Once it had belonged to Doc Marriott—technically it still did—until the old doctor had taken up residence in the heart of Colbyville. It had no value. Some cowboys had used it for their headquarters the summer before, and Matt had spent a long time cleaning up after them. But it had its advantages. It was free, at least until he could afford to pay Marriott something for it; and it was a place where he could bring a wife, as long as she wasn't too particular. It was a start.

He lighted a lantern in the stable and unsaddled the gelding. Beside a medical certificate, a saddlebag full of assorted instruments, a secondhand library, and two appropriately conservative suits, the big red horse was his only possession. He was careful of it. He doled out a feed of bran, checked

it for blanket scalds, and began to curry it. The red coat glistened in the lamplight, and made him think of the high-blooded black he had seen in front of the road ranch. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that the horse belonged to Brett Wilder. But what was Wilder doing at a run-down saloon, at eleven o'clock in the night, when his wife was pregnant?

It was easy enough to explain. A man could expect a certain amount of nervousness in the latter stages of his wife's pregnancy. And a cold glass of beer was one way of alleviating it. Though Wilder preferred brandy. And the gaudy saloons of Colbyville were more to his taste.

Matt finished with the red gelding and hung up the comb. He stood looking at the animal without seeing it. Wilder. He had never been quite sure what to make of the man. He was likable. And perhaps a little too good to be true, with his softly-polished good manners, and his easy sincerity. But they were qualities that could hardly be counted against him. His southern upbringing was responsible for his manners. There was nothing strange about that; since the war, the country was full of exiled gentlemen.

He laughed, and went over to turn off the lantern. Was there something wrong with a man drinking a glass of beer? He was certainly getting narrow-minded in his old age. But his hand paused when it touched the lantern, and came down again. It was easy to mistake restlessness for intuition, but what harm would there be in visiting

Emily Wilder? If he was wrong, he could always turn around and come back, without even going to the door, with only the loss of a little sleep. He wasn't ready to sleep yet anyway. The evening seemed somehow incomplete. The red gelding snorted when he threw the blanket over its back, and bumped him once while he was swinging up the saddle.

He went back down the road, pointing toward the other side of the valley. The moon would be up in a while, and he thought of how it would look from the Balfour porch. It was Judith who had caused his restlessness. He could blame her for that. But not for long. A month, two months. Though there were still obstacles. There was Henry Balfour, for one, and Matt couldn't entirely blame him. There was a wide gap between the daughter of one of the partners of Balfour & Wilkins, Mining Investments, Ltd., and a near penniless young doctor. Brett Wilder had had it easier, apparently. He'd been just as poor, according to Judith, but he had what Henry Balfour would call "background." It must have counted for something. It had gotten Wilder a pretty wife, and a good job in the Dexter mine, and a home that he could at least afford to pay rent for.

The house stood by itself, with nothing around it but an old abandoned mine, set way back against the hill. The mine had been profitable once; the house had four columns rising up the front, and a wide porch. It must have looked cheap and pretentious when it was first built; age had given it

a certain elegance. There were plenty of lights on, and the front door was standing ajar, and Matt rode into the yard and shouted.

No one answered. He got down and crossed the porch and rapped on the door. The house was silent. He waited for a moment, then went inside. A log smoldered in the fireplace. An errant coal had popped out onto the floor, and he started to kick it back. Instead, he picked it up with his hand. It was quite cold. It had left a dark, burned spot on the floor. He broke it apart and found it still without warmth. It was strange, he thought, that it could have stayed there that long, without anyone noticing it. He called again, and waited. He went back to the porch and leaned against one of the tall, heavy columns, letting his eyes get used once more to the darkness. The gelding blew through its nostrils. Matt hadn't bothered to use the hitch rack; now he noticed that the horse had moved. He noticed something else that explained the gelding's nervousness. Someone was lying just outside the circle of light from the porch lantern.

Matt ran down the stairs and bent over the woman. He didn't have to look to know it was Emily Wilder. He lifted her head, and with the other hand felt for her wrist. The pulse was weak. He got up on one knee and lifted her with as much gentleness as he could manage. She had never been a big woman, not tall like Judith, and lacking Amy's full ripeness. What was growing inside her had added little to her weight. He carried her to the house and laid her on the couch in the sitting room,

and for a moment watched while her eyelids fluttered and her mouth worked soundlessly.

"Emily. Wake up, Emily." He didn't wait. He found a towel in the kitchen and pumped cold water over it. Smelling salts would be better, but he didn't know where in the house to find them. His own were in the saddlebag. Damn that gelding, he thought. There was no telling how far it had wandered by now.

But she was already awake when he went back into the sitting room.

"Well, Emily," he said. "You should take better care of yourself." It was meant to sound confident and unconcerned, but there was a hollow ring about it. She didn't respond. Her eyes were open, but fixed at some point beyond him, uncomprehending. There was a little white saliva at the corner of her mouth.

"Brett . . . Please . . . wait . . ."

"Emily. It's Matt. Matt Kirby."

"Brett . . . Don't . . . How could you . . . ? My own . . . I know who she is. . . . Don't, Brett. . . . Please . . . Please . . ."

Matt laid the wet towel across her forehead. "Wake up, Emily," he said, this time loudly so that his voice rattled about the high-ceilinged room. Her eyes closed, and then came open again, focusing on him.

"Matt. Oh, Matt . . ."

"What is it, Emily? What happened?"

"I fell. I guess I wasn't careful. Doctor Marriott warned me. He said I shouldn't be . . ."

"No. It wasn't that."

She turned her head away from him before he could see the tears. "It wasn't very much," she said, her voice so low that he could hardly hear her. "He was going out. I don't blame him. I kept nagging. . . . You know how it is. . . . Oh, Matt, I felt so big and ugly. . . . It wasn't his fault. I tried to stop him, and his horse hit me. He didn't know. . . ."

She wasn't altogether lying. He could recognize the half-truths that were meant to deceive him. "A moment ago, you said something about a woman. . . ."

"Did I? I must have been out of my head, Matt. I didn't know what I was saying."

He nodded. She was looking at him now, waiting for some sign of his disbelief, and he showed her nothing. She turned over again, lying on her side, and drew her knees up, and screamed.

"What is it?" Matt said. But she was unconscious now. He got up and went around to the other side of the couch and tried to draw her knees down. But the strength that pain had given her was uncanny. She lay locked in her own spasm, resisting him, and he gave it up. It wasn't necessary. He knew all that he had to know. He already recognized the symptoms: the gray, lifeless face, the bluish tinge at the base of her fingernails, the inner skin of her eyelids which was entirely colorless. Somewhere inside, secret and unseen, she was bleeding to death.

He ran out into the darkness toward the gelding. As he was unstrapping the saddlebags she screamed

again, but the sound failed to touch him now. The first moment of fear was gone. She was no longer Judith's sister, no longer a human being, really; merely a patient. He had to think calmly. There wasn't time to get Marriott. And he could imagine what the ride to town would do to her. No, he was alone with her, and the awful realization came back; he couldn't entirely submerge it. She *was* Judith's sister. And he was alone. When he drew back her robe finally, he saw the purple bruise on her belly. He spread out the instruments carefully, watching the beads of perspiration rise on her forehead, listening to her unconscious mouthings, and knowing all the time that she was dying.

Later, when he stood up, the lamps in the sitting room had burned down, and her face seemed peaceful in the gentle light. Whatever pain she had felt was gone. But the face haunted him. It was all well and good, he thought, to say that she felt nothing now. It was small comfort. There was no comfort at all in knowing that he had done his best. It didn't change anything, didn't for one moment alter the fact. He found a sheet, and then hesitated before covering her, reluctant to admit that she was really dead.

It wasn't the final act. There was still the cleaning up to do. There was no one to do it for him. He went about it hurriedly, thinking how much he was like a criminal covering up the clues: the impersonal after-products of death, the blood that wasn't of any use any longer. In the end there wouldn't be anything left but a few dark stains.

He went into the kitchen and cleaned his instru-

ments and came back. Everything was neat and orderly, and still he wasn't finished. Nothing was as simple as it seemed, not even death. He thought of Judith: How can I tell her? Will it be any easier because I love her? Will my words be one whit more comforting? And Emily. He couldn't bear the thought of leaving her here. The big house seemed so deserted and lonely.

He harnessed the buggy team and brought it around to the front. He carried the woman out and laid her behind the seat. The gelding came over without any fuss, then snorted at the white sheet, and retreated again. He let it go. All the lights of the house were out, and he was ready.

He kept the horses at a slow trot, still reluctant, still thinking of Judith and what he would say to her. It would hit her the hardest. It was difficult for him to imagine anything penetrating Henry Balfour's cold exterior. And he felt only anger at Brett Wilder. What had Emily said? There were her little half-truths, of course. But the words that she had uttered from the half-light of unconsciousness: "Don't Brett. How could you? My own . . . I know who she is. . . ." It was plain enough, no matter how incomplete. He felt the rage take hold of him, and was unable to resist it.

Later, when he saw the lights of the road ranch, he turned the team toward them. A light shone in the main part of the building, and upstairs another lamp glowed faintly through a curtained window. He parked the buggy and got down. The black horse still stood at the hitch rack, and he walked

over to it. There was no doubt in his mind now that the animal belonged to Brett Wilder. The anger stirred in him like a hot, raw wind. When he got inside it took him a moment to realize that the place was empty.

There was only old Hattie, the proprietress. She sat behind the bar, a little drunk, her mountainous flesh sagging like some semi-liquid substance, her eyes bleary but still shrewd. She'd seen better days. The girls upstairs were gone. The prospectors who had once stomped their boots on her tiny dance floor had moved to town, to work for the big mines. Only a few cowboys, and an occasional traveler, used the place now. She shifted on the stool and showed Matt her tobacco-stained teeth.

"Hyah, Doc," she said cheerfully. "What brings you out at this time of night?"

"A beer, Hattie." He leaned against the bar and looked around the place. He seldom came here, but the road ranch was familiar. There was no one in sight. He turned back and looked at Hattie. Her dress came down in a sharp V between her balloon-like breasts; the skin there was red and splotchy.

"I'm looking for Brett Wilder," he said.

Hattie replied in a hoarse, casual voice. "I ain't seen him, dearie. Look for yourself. There ain't nobody here but me."

Matt rolled a cigarette. "There's two horses outside. And a light's burning upstairs."

"A couple of cowboys," Hattie said. She reached down for a bottle with a flabby, shapeless arm, and poured herself a drink. "They're grazin' cows on

Big Meadow. That's what I've come to, rentin' rooms to dirty cowpunchers for fifty cents a night. Why, I can remember . . ."

Matt interrupted her. "That black outside belongs to Brett Wilder."

She fixed Matt with a glassy, angry stare. It was hard to tell which meant the most to her: being called a liar, or having one of her long-winded reminiscences cut off before she was fairly started.

"That horse ain't Brett Wilder's," she said, and went on, still staring at him, as though she could keep him from interrupting her again.

"No, things ain't the same. Men workin' for the big operators for two dollars a day. Wives and children. Why, I remember the time when them rooms upstairs brought three dollars a night. Without any additional accommodations, if you know what I mean."

She gave him a broad wink, took a breath, and swilled down the glass of whisky. She heard something, and her eyes darted sideways and seemed to strain at the soft flesh around them. The door to the stairway opened and Brett Wilder walked into the room.

It might have been the shadows of the saloon, or it might have been that he hadn't expected to find anyone there. He glanced at Matt without seeing him, and called to the fat woman.

"Another bottle, Hattie."

Hattie slid down off the stool and reached for a bottle. Wilder leaned on the bar and ran a hand delicately through his hair. He was dressed less carefully than usual; he wore no coat and his tie

hung loosely from the open collar. He was tall and heavy-set, with just a suggestion of overweight. His fingers tapered sharply like a woman's.

Matt went over to him. "Hello, Brett."

"Kirby," Wilder said. He looked up. If any expression of surprise crossed his face, it was gone quickly. But his hand jerked up toward his collar, as if to straighten it, and then dropped to the bar again. Old Hattie had put up the bottle.

"Well, this is a surprise," Wilder said. "A pleasant one. I was just leaving. But I'll stay now. Let's have a drink."

Matt shook his head. He watched Wilder's face. In a moment he would smash that serene composure. He felt the anger rise again; his hands were sweating.

"You're lying," Matt said. "You weren't going home."

"Now, listen," Wilder began indignantly, then paused. He glanced at the open door that led to the stairway. He turned back to Matt, his smile warm and sheepish and confiding. "Well, you've caught me at it. I feel like a fool. But you know how it is, Sport. A man has to get out once in a while, when his wife's pregnant. You'll find that out." He laughed, and slapped Matt on the shoulder. "You'll be in the same fix yourself sometime."

He was drunk. He smiled again and watched Hattie putting up two glasses.

"One drink," he said. "To my new brother-in-law. Then I'd better be getting home, eh, Kirby?"

"It's too late," Matt said. "Emily's dead."

"What?"

"Emily's dead," Matt said. "She bled to death. I couldn't stop it."

Wilder stared at him incredulously. "Why, she can't be. I left her not . . ."

"Hours ago, Wilder."

"All right, all right," Wilder said irritably. "But she was well enough then. I can't believe . . ."

"She's dead," Matt said. It was almost a pleasure to repeat it, to inflict the hurt—whatever hurt was possible. "She hemorrhaged. There was nothing I could do to stop it."

"You? I thought Marriott was her doctor."

"He was. But you can't blame me for it, Wilder. You can blame yourself."

Wilder picked up the glass of whisky and drank it greedily. He set it down and refilled it. "I didn't have anything to do with it, Kirby. She was pregnant. You know that."

Matt watched a little whisky work out at the corner of Wilder's chin. It was the only laxness in the man's composure. As though nothing really important had happened, nothing that a few drinks couldn't cure. He had already forgotten his part of it, whatever that part had been. Matt couldn't be sure. But there were still those words that Emily had spoken. There would never be a better time to find out what they meant.

He spread his hand flat over Wilder's whisky glass. "What happened out there, Brett?"

Wilder looked up at him. His eyes were beginning to glaze over. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said thickly.

"All right," Matt said. It was easy enough to put together; he didn't need Wilder's help. "I'll tell you, then. She knew where you were going—and why. She had probably known about it for a long time—it doesn't matter. You had a fight out there in the yard. She didn't want you to go. You must have been out of your head, Wilder, because you didn't even stop when your horse knocked her down."

"Why, that's a lie," Wilder said. He straightened up, but kept his hands on the bar to steady himself. He eyed Matt calculatingly, and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. "It's funny, she was all right when I left. You're not trying to cover up a botched job, are you, Kirby?"

It wasn't the deceit, nor the accusations. It was merely that no twinge of grief or conscience seemed to have touched him. The smooth, complacent face loomed in front of Matt irresistibly. He hit Wilder on the side of the jaw and dropped him to his knees.

He stayed there for a moment, shaking his head. The whisky had done as much damage as the blow. He reached a hand up finally, gripping the bar, and pulled himself upright. Matt could see him struggling for a smile, and didn't give him a chance. Wilder's guard dropped too late. He clutched his belly, turned half-around toward the door of the stairway, and was sick. Old Hattie let out a feeble croak of protest from behind the bar.

Matt turned away from the sight of Wilder's bent form. The sound of his retching drained him

of the last bit of anger. He put a dime on the bar, watched the fat woman veer from her course toward Wilder to pick it up, and left.

Outside a breeze was sweeping across the floor of the valley. It was good to smell the fresh air, to clean himself of the smell of stale tobacco and beer. He stood there for a minute, watching the grass move and listening to the sounds of the night: the grass itself, a coyote far up in the timber, the bawl of a calf from some bed ground down the valley. Then the light in the yard grew stronger. He hadn't heard the door of the road ranch open. The light could only come from upstairs, from the curtained window that he had noticed earlier. Now someone had drawn the curtains back. He was afraid to turn, held by some premonition, and at the same time attracted by it. The horses fidgeted, and he took up the lines; then he glanced toward the window.

In the next moment the lamp went out. But he had seen all that he needed of the figure silhouetted against the pale, retreating glow. Amy Balfour. It seemed impossible, and yet he stood there for a long time, watching the darkened window, and remembering Emily's words, "I know who she is. My own . . ." My own sister? He got in the buggy. Way off in the distance he could see the lights of Colbyville, clear and unappealing.

2

He drove up the main street, past the gaudy lights of the saloons and gambling houses. The street was still lively; its gaiety would go on until the first grayness of morning. Miners strolled along the sidewalks, some of them going home after a late shift in the mines, others not going home at all, lured by the noises and smells of the places along the row. A piano jangled somewhere. A woman shouted. There were whores in the shadows of the side-streets and alleys.

But a few blocks up the street the town changed. There were no lights on. The big white houses of the mine-owners stood in darkness. Matt rode to the end and parked the buggy. Going up the path he tried again to think of some words of condolence, but his mind was a blank. His steps dragged under Emily Wilder's still, lifeless weight.

The door knocker shattered the quiet of the upper street. He heard sounds from inside the house, a door slamming, the pad of bare feet. In a moment Judith's brother opened the door and thrust a lamp out into the darkness.

"Matt!"

"Hello, Chad. Let me in." He shouldered by the youth and turned down the hall. Henry Balfour's study was the closest. He waited while Chad searched for a match and got another lamp going.

"It's Emily," he said. "You'd better wake up your father, Chad. And Judith. She's dead."

It was the only way he could say it. There was no easy way. He watched the color drain from the boy's face, thin and sensitive, and already pale; his eyes shone with moisture in the lamplight. He was only sixteen. And he had never been what Henry Balfour would have called "manly."

"I'm sorry, Chad," Matt said. "Just call them down here. I'll break it to them, if you want me to."

The youth glanced toward the stairway. "No," he said. He had more manliness than his father suspected. "I'm all right, now. It's my job, I guess."

But he went reluctantly, as though he lacked the strength to climb the tall staircase. Matt was left alone in the room. He looked down at Emily Wilder. Now that the anger was gone, he felt only pity. But didn't he feel a certain amount of remorse, too? Wasn't there something more that he could have done? It was part of a doctor's job, he supposed, this feeling of guilt and uncertainty. He glanced at his hands, strong and supple and intelligent, the priceless hands of a surgeon. For Emily Wilder they had availed nothing.

Pity was an emotion that Matt had never directed toward Henry Balfour. And he couldn't pity him now. Whatever the man felt, he kept it buried somewhere beneath his cold exterior. He glanced

briefly at Matt, tied the belt of his robe, and lifted one corner of the sheet from his daughter's body. Then he let it drop and again went to stand behind the big oak desk at the other end of the room. He didn't say anything. He watched Judith, heard her little gasp and the cry that she couldn't quite subdue; he listened with a sort of labored patience. Some shadow of grief passed over his face, lingering there only for a moment.

"All right," Henry Balfour said. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Matt said. He glanced at Judith and Chad. "Maybe we ought to wait, Mr. Balfour. There's no point in going into it now. The details . . ."

"They don't have to listen," Balfour said. "It's up to them. I want to know what happened."

Matt shrugged. He knew what Balfour wanted: a neat, concise report. And perhaps it was better that way. In the end, he could spare them nothing. "I'm not sure," he said again. "I found her lying in the yard. Some time past midnight. She was in shock, and I diagnosed the cause as internal hemorrhage. I had to operate."

"You what?" Balfour said, leaning suddenly across the desk.

Matt watched him, not understanding. Hadn't he seen the long mark of the scalpel when he lifted the sheet? "I had to operate, Mr. Balfour. There wasn't anything else I could do."

Henry Balfour came around the desk. He regarded Matt coldly. "But you weren't her doctor. You didn't have any right to operate."

"It's not a question of right," Matt said a little impatiently. "I did the only thing I could. It was too late to get Doc Marriott."

"Too late?"

"She must have been lying there for a while. I'm not sure how long." He looked at Judith. "It was just past ten when I left here, wasn't it? That would make it about ten-thirty when I passed Hattie Tunstall's place. And it was after midnight that I found Emily."

"What does that prove, Kirby?"

"It means that Emily had been lying there two or three hours," Matt said. "It had to be that long, at least, because I saw Brett Wilder's horse at the rack when I passed Tunstall's."

"That proves nothing," Balfour said. "Whatever happened to her, it could have happened any time after—"

"No," Matt said. "They had a fight. She followed Brett out into the yard, and must have got in the way of his horse. I'm not sure about it, though. She wasn't conscious very long."

"That still—"

"She told me something else, in delirium, before she woke up. She said, 'Don't go, Brett. Please. I know who she is.' " But he stopped there. He couldn't tell them the rest of it: "My own. . ." He had to spare them that much, at least.

But Henry Balfour seemed to no longer be listening. He had turned to Chad. "Wake up the Negro and send him down to Doc Marriott's. And the constable, too. And Brett. Tell them I want them all up here, right away."

The boy started out. "Wait a minute, Chad," Matt said, and turned to Balfour. "Why drag all those people up here? They can't help anything. She's dead. If you don't believe . . ." That was it. It had never occurred to him before that Henry Balfour might not believe him. And now he could see it on the man's face, not disbelief exactly, but distrust, a lack of faith. It was understandable. Emily was dead; that one fact was indisputable. Brett Wilder was a man of honor; that fact too must have been just as unquestioned in Henry Balfour's mind.

"It's not that I don't believe you," Balfour said, and seemed to recognize the falseness of what he was saying; his voice lacked conviction. "But there are a few loose ends that need tying. And Brett ought to be here."

"What about Marriott and the constable?"

"One's a doctor, the other's the law. They both seem appropriate enough."

"You can go to hell," Matt said. He had tried to check himself, tried to remember what Emily's death must have meant to Balfour. But the man only succeeded in stirring his anger. "I don't know what you want. I don't care. If you think I'm going to stay here . . . You've had your say. And I've had my fill of it."

He turned and started for the door. Henry Balfour said, "Wait," and slid open the drawer of the desk. Matt's back was to him. But he saw Judith's hand come up to her mouth in fright and surprise. He spun around. Balfour cocked the Navy colt and leveled it at him.

"I told you to wait. I want to get to the bottom of this. I'm far from satisfied." He looked down at the gun, and then at Chad, thoughtfully. Chad started out of the room. "No," Balfour said, coming over to him. "On second thought, I'll wake up the Negro myself." He thrust the gun into Chad's hand. "And leave Mr. Kirby to you."

Chad fingered the gun nervously; his hand shook. Henry Balfour noticed it. His eyes were sad and mocking.

"You don't have much gumption, do you son?" he said heavily. "Well, it's time you got some. I don't want Kirby to leave this room."

He was gone before Chad could say anything; he could only follow him with eyes that for an instant were filled with hatred. They could hear Henry Balfour going through the back of the house, toward the stable where the old Negro servant slept. The gun looked clumsy and out of place in Chad's hand. The redness hadn't left his face. He looked at Matt imploringly.

"It's all right," Matt said. "I'm not going anywhere." It might make the boy feel better. He felt sorry for him. He liked Chad, not merely because the boy had always looked up to him, but perhaps because he was so different from his father. He had little of Henry Balfour's austere British blood, Doc Marriott was in the habit of saying.

No, he had no intention of leaving now. It would only seem like he was running away, and there was nothing that he was afraid of. The facts had become muddled in Henry Balfour's mind, but they'd seem clearer in the morning, when he was

over the first shock of Emily's death. He looked at Judith, and wondered suddenly if she shared her father's feelings.

"You don't think . . ." he said, and knelt down beside her chair. He felt sorry for her, for the redness under her eyes, for the shoulders that shook so imperceptibly when he put his arm around her. "I did the best I could. Maybe somebody else could have done better. But there wasn't time."

"No, Matt," she said. But was there a trace of hesitation in her voice? He could attribute it to her shock. For the first few hours at least he must seem inseparable from Emily's death. But it angered him nevertheless. He stood up and walked across the room, expecting at any moment that she would sense his feeling of rebuke and try to repair it. But she didn't say anything. One of the lamps had burned down and he could read nothing on her face.

They had filled up the lamp again and placed it on a table overlooking Emily Wilder's body. Doctor Will Marriott moved it now and then, and in his preoccupation set the chimney to jiggling; it threw crazy shadows about the study. One of them fell on the old doctor's face, but the face showed nothing anyway. Nothing but leanness, and a lack of surprise that had come from age. Constable Hadley watched him from a discreet distance.

Doc Marriott finally let the sheet fall. He stood staring down at it, his thin old body bent like a crane, as though there were still something to see.

"Well?" Henry Balfour said.

Doc Marriott straightened up. "Well, what?" he said. He glanced at Judith, and then lowered his voice. "She's dead. Is that what you dragged me up here to tell you? And Hadley. He's a constable. It was the coroner you wanted, wasn't it?"

Balfour ignored the crotchetiness; his face showed only a trace of anger. "I know she's dead. I want to know why."

Marriott looked over at Matt. "It seems like he could tell you better."

"I've heard it already," Balfour said coldly.

"But I haven't," Mariott said, and glanced inquiringly at Matt.

It was easier to explain to the old doctor. He left out nothing—nothing but the one detail, the silhouette of the woman in the window. The rest seemed so readily understandable. He had done his best; there weren't any doubts except the usual ones that accompanied failure. And all the symptoms had seemed so indisputable: the grayish skin, the colorless eyelids and blue fingernails, the terrible pain in her abdomen that no uterine spasm accounted for. And the bruise. She was bleeding internally from severe injury. He had simply been unable to stop the hemorrhaging. He had been too late. That was the crux. And it suddenly occurred to him that everything he had said depended upon it. Time. And if that time hadn't really elapsed, then he was guilty of some blunder—in Balfour's mind, at least.

He could see that Marriott believed him. There was no reason why he shouldn't. But still the old doctor was shaking his head.

"I never did like this sort of business," he said, mostly speaking to himself. "I've had cases like this myself. Nobody around. No time to get permission. And then some crazy relative blames you if the patient doesn't pull through. Malpractice. That's not what you're suggesting, is it, Balfour?"

Henry Balfour stood behind his desk. He was dressed now, immaculate in a severe gray suit that matched the severity of his expression. He looked directly at Marriott, and said, "Precisely," and for a long time the room was silent.

"You're a fool," Marriott said.

"Am I?" Balfour said. The loss of sleep, the tragedy of the night, didn't seem to affect his composure. "Perhaps. I asked you up here for your opinion. We'll find out how much of a fool I am as soon as you've given it."

"I can't give an opinion," Marriott said. "I wasn't there."

"But you were there this morning. She was all right then."

"Yes. But something happened to her. That bruise has to be explained."

"Not by me. She might have fallen down, anything. All I know is that Kirby operated on her, and now she's dead."

"No. We know more than that. You heard what Matt said."

"That's just the point. We don't know what really happened at all. All we know is what Kirby said. Some nonsense about gray skin and bluish fingernails. So he cut her open, just for that."

"Don't lose your head, Balfour. He was right,

wasn't he? He did all he could. He was simply too late."

Balfour smiled, but only to denote the irony of Marriott's words.

"He *said* he was right. He'd say it anyway, even if he'd botched the job."

Matt shouldered past the old doctor. He might have reached across for Balfour, except for the width of the desk. But he only stood trembling with anger. "Yes, I could have saved her, if somebody had told me. If Brett Wilder had told me. He didn't. He was down at Tunstall's, instead, half-drunk with a woman upstairs—" And there was something else. Why not tell them now? God, but he was sick of it, sick of Balfour, sick of Judith's silence. Sick of the smell of death and the endless accusations. Yes, he'd tell them. If it was the only way—

"You're a liar, Matt!"

No one had heard Brett Wilder come in. But they could see his tall figure in the darkened hall, outlined against the gray light of morning in the open doorway. He had cleaned up, but there was still an air of distraught carelessness about him. If it rang a little false, no one but Matt had any reason to notice it.

"You're a liar, Kirby," he said again.

"Am I?" Matt said. "I'm glad you're here. Tell them Brett. Tell them about Emily. Tell them how long you were down at Tunstall's."

"I'll tell them," Wilder said. "I was down there fifteen minutes, maybe less. Emily wasn't feeling well. I went to get her some brandy."

Matt couldn't see his face in the darkness, but he thought he must be smiling. It seemed so suitable.

"And I'll tell them something else. You murdered my wife, Kirby. You're going to pay for it."

Nobody noticed Wilder's gun until its explosion shook the little room. A window broke behind Balfour's desk. Matt stepped off balance and stumbled toward Chad.

"Chad," Henry Balfour said, his voice high and insistent. But Chad didn't understand. He stood rooted. Matt grabbed his gun, swung it toward Wilder, and fired. Brett Wilder spun around and fell into the darkness of the hallway.

They all stood looking at him for a moment. Then Doc Marriott picked up a lamp. He went out into the hall and bent over Wilder. "He's not hurt bad," he said. "Just his shoulder."

Henry Balfour came around his desk and stopped in front of his son. His hand made a flat, ringing sound against the boy's cheek. "I gave you that gun to use. I thought you had some backbone, at least. I was wrong."

Then he crossed the room to Matt and stood staring down at the gun. "You didn't have to do that. He was upset. It's too bad, too, because it spoiled his aim. But he said you'd pay for what you've done. I'll see to it that you do. You'll never practice medicine in this state again. Or any other. I promise you that, Kirby."

He meant it, Matt knew. But even if it turned out to be less than an idle boast, it didn't matter. It was powerless to touch his anger. He threw the gun to the floor and watched it skitter under the

massive oak desk. He turned, shoving by the crowd in the hallway, and left the house.

It was only after he reached the gate that he was aware of someone calling him. Judith. But it was too late now, after all her silence. He didn't stop. It was dawn, and somehow the air seemed fresher when he had at last quit the big white houses and come out into the fading lights of the lower town.

3

The sun was up, faintly warm, and any other morning Brett Wilder would have let the black horse take its time. Especially with the aching in his shoulder. But this morning he was in a hurry. He needed a drink, not for his nerves, but simply because he could feel the approaching hangover. He had drunk way too much. But his senses were clear now, and he knew that things hadn't turned out as badly as they had first seemed.

But what a mess it had been, until he finally untangled it. And what a fool he had acted, losing his temper there in the yard, letting the horse get away from him. In that black rage he couldn't be sure that it hadn't been intentional. He hadn't known she was really hurt, of course. And he felt sorry for her; she must have suffered, lying there all that time. Poor Emily. Had he loved her? He couldn't tell now; it was too easy to confuse love with some other emotion: pity, his own sense of guilt, even hatred. And certainly he had hated her at times. She was too cold-blooded for his taste; not ruthless, but simply lacking in warmth; she was frigid. He hadn't discovered it until after he had

married her, of course, when it was too late. It was really Emily's fault that he'd taken up with Amy in the first place. Amy was warmer. Amy was nothing but a little slut, and it was a pity; but that was what a man needed sometimes. But how had Emily found out? He'd been careless, there was no doubt of that. It was only luck that had pulled him through. Luck, and his own ingenuity. What a performance he had given. The enraged husband. But his luck had failed him then. That bad shot. Who could have blamed him for killing Kirby? Still, things had worked out well in the end. He'd turned facts into lies. And his little drama had convinced Henry Balfour. He couldn't help smiling as he swung off toward Hattie Tunstall's road ranch.

He didn't want to go there. But there was no place else. He couldn't go home, not for a while, at least. He couldn't face it, any more than he could face the truth of Emily's death. The mind was strange and wonderful, he thought; how easy it was to come by self-righteous anger. And who could really say that Matt Kirby hadn't somehow blundered?

He got down at the back of the road ranch and slipped in the side door. The bottle of whisky that he'd offered to share with Kirby—and he'd carried that off nicely too, regardless of the results—was still standing on the bar. Old Hattie was asleep on her stool, sagged down, a stream of sunlight touching her face, and flies buzzing around her. She woke up without moving. Her little eyes settled directly on Wilder, as if she had been watching him all the time.

Wilder picked up the bottle. He didn't want to talk to the old hag now. He started toward the stairs.

"You ain't paid for that," Hattie said. "You ain't paid for something else."

He went back to the bar and took out his wallet. He put down a fifty-dollar bill and waited for the fat woman's eyes to focus on it. Old Hattie shook her head, and he put down fifty more.

"That's all," he said. "And remember. I was only here for a few minutes."

He could trust her for any other details. He had to, and for a moment the thought disgusted him. Her very smell seemed a personal affront. He took the bottle and hurried up the stairs.

The room was no different from the other deserted rooms along the hall, except that it was cleaner. He had insisted on that much. There was an iron bed and a chair and a table for the lamp. Amy Balfour lay with her face toward the wall, the sheet turned down so that the full length of her young back was exposed. She heard him come in and sat up, tossing out her blond hair and pulling the sheet up over her breasts. Wilder smiled wryly, amused at her sudden modesty.

"What happened?" she said.

"Nothing." It was a pity, he thought, that he couldn't tell her the details. Her little self-centered mind could appreciate nothing but Emily's death. Well, she'd had time to get over it. Though she must have cried herself to sleep; her eyes were red and swollen.

"They think Kirby's to blame," he said. "At

least your father does, and that's all that counts. He's threatening to have Kirby thrown out of the profession. If I know the old man, he'll follow through on it."

He'd find it no difficulty, Wilder knew. The big mines practically ran the state, and anything else that they cared to bother with. Henry Balfour had never been a man to let his influence lie idle, and no one knew that better than Brett Wilder. He'd seen it from the beginning, before he married Emily. And he'd come a long way since then—Assistant Manager of the Shamrock Mine. It was far from the end. He had Henry Balfour's confidence; it seemed no longer necessary to be his son-in-law besides.

He poured himself a drink. "You want one?" he said, and knew that she didn't. She had only one vice, but it was sufficient. She noticed his shoulder for the first time—he had kept his hand in his pocket to support it—and leaned toward him.

"Brett, you're hurt." There was true tenderness in her voice. He smiled at her, amused. He had never kept anything from her, none of his faults or appetites or vices, and it had never seemed to matter. It was strange how love made a person tolerant. And she loved him, all right.

He went over and sat down on the bed beside her. She opened his shirt, looking at the bandage, and he didn't pay any attention. He was thinking of the night before, earlier, before all the trouble. The sheet had fallen from around her. He lifted one of her breasts, cupping it in his hand. It was pleasant to know that he could have her any time

he wanted. But he didn't want her now. She was making little disturbed sounds with her tongue that irritated him. "Brett, you're hurt."

"It's nothing," he said, and stood up. He had to think. Was there any loose end that might trip him up? But nothing occurred to him. He could trust the old woman. He could trust Amy. No, there was no danger there. He smiled again, a little wonderingly, because he had never been more certain of her loyalty.

She was sitting with the sheet demurely in place over her breasts. He studied her. She was young. Her body was soft yet firm, and early ripening. And she had a passion that was an amusing contrast to her modest and proper upbringing. It was the quality in her that appealed to him the most.

He shifted his gaze. The sunlight hit the window now, and he noticed for the first time that the curtains were drawn back. It probably meant nothing. But he turned to the girl.

"How long have those curtains been open?"

He knew at once that something was wrong. She wouldn't look at him. And the color was rising unmistakably on her cheeks.

"What happened?" he demanded.

She didn't answer at first, not until he had stepped toward her. "I don't know, Brett," she said finally, anxiously. She was afraid. "I heard all the noise downstairs. I opened the curtain to look out. He was standing in the yard."

"And he saw you."

"I don't know. . . ."

He hit her. She let out a little whimper and

huddled under the sheet, like a child. He finished the glass of whisky and poured himself another, and stood looking down at her. He felt sorry for her; he hadn't meant to hurt her. It was only that he had lost his temper. Well, he couldn't afford to have it happen again. He had to think clearly; there was just a chance that he wasn't through with Matthew Kirby yet.

4

In the mountains there were a few scattered patches of snow on the ground, in the dark places where the sun couldn't reach down through the tall pines and cedars. It was cold and shady where Matthew Kirby was working, but he had to stop frequently to wipe the sweat out of his eyes, and to rest. After three months his body was just getting used to the strenuous labor. When he stopped the woods were silent, except for an occasional jay, and the constant murmur of the wind in the treetops, and the old man's complaining.

"You tell me what the all-fired hurry is about, and then maybe I'll know something," Jake Grisby said. He was tall and old, and trying to straighten up from the cedar bolt had put a crick in his back. He slapped his hand on it and made a face at Matt to display his irritation.

"There won't be enough snow for another month," he went on, gradually easing himself upward. "How do you expect to take out a load of shakes if there ain't enough snow to run a sled over? A wagon, maybe?"

"Maybe," Matt said. He was watching a water

ouzel bobbing on the bank of the little stream below.

"No wagon would ever make it over those rocks any more," Jake said. "I told you that."

He was right, of course. The road had been better when people had made the first rush into the country, but after a couple of seasons they had worn it down. The spring freshets took to following it after that, carrying the light soil down the mountainside, and now there were only boulders left, large enough to stop any wagon. A sled and a deep pack of snow was the only answer.

"Maybe it will snow early," Matt said, and smiled when the old man snorted. "At least we'll have a good supply of shakes to start out with."

But there was more to it than that. The countryside had stopped growing, and the demand for shakes was small. A man could get all he wanted by hiring a bunch of bums and has-beens, giving them enough to eat, but mostly enough to drink, and hauling them up to the high timber country. There was nothing to be gained by creating a surplus. It was simply that he wanted to keep busy. His hands, mostly. And after ten hours in the woods it was easier to sleep at night.

He picked up the frow and maul and went back to the cedar bolt. He had to bend just as far as the old man did. He was just as tall, and wider-shouldered, and he worked with a casual precision that appeared careless, and wasn't. The old man had sat down and was watching him. He popped his tobacco to the other side of his mouth and spat disgustedly.

"I've been cuttin' shakes for thirty years, off and on," he said. "You catch on to it mighty quick for a greenhorn. You'd do even better if you'd stop worryin' about those hands of yours."

Matt didn't say anything. He looked down at his hands, and thought for the thousandth time of Henry Balfour. The man had been right; he'd carried out his threat to the letter. Still, Matt was careful of his hands; they were still well-groomed, with only the morning's accumulation of dirt under the fingernails. It was strange how a habit stayed on long after the reason for it was gone.

The old wagon road curved in and out of the bends of the mountain, and it was difficult to hear anyone coming until they were almost in sight. Matt thought he heard a rider. A moment later a man crossed the little creek and rode up toward them.

It was a man from Deadhorse Flat, and he didn't bother to get down. He patted the mule he was riding and gazed disinterestedly at the pile of shakes.

"Hello, Matt. Hello, Jake. Nice stack of shakes you got there. . . . It's getting cold for this time of year. . . . Stutz Tolbert took to fighting with a fella up at Deadhorse and got a bullet in the leg. We thought maybe . . ."

"There's a doctor in Colbyville," Matt said.

"That's a long ways. We thought maybe . . . well, you've helped us out before. . . ."

"Is he hurt badly?"

"He's hollerin' plenty."

"All right," Matt said. He put down the maul

and frow and took his coat from the stump of the cedar.

"We'd be obliged, Matt. You'll find him lying in Carlson's store. I'll just ride ahead and tell him you're coming."

Jake had been silent. He didn't say anything until the man forded the creek again and went up out of sight among the trees.

"And that's something else again," he said, as though continuing a long list of reflections. "Every time some fool shoots his toe off he comes yellin' to you for help. How 'bout all this shake splittin' that you're so damned worried about?"

"It'll wait," Matt said. "If we have to go as far as Deadhorse, we might as well go right into Colbyville. We need flour and bacon, and grain for the horses. And we might get an order for venison. That should make you happier. You wouldn't have to work for a while."

"Huntin's work, just like anything else. I ain't afraid of it, if that's what you mean."

He went on grumbling, but the prospects of going to town had brightened him up. Matt could hear him all the way up the trail.

It was only a half mile to the cabin. It sat on a little bench clearing with a lean-to stable and pole corral off to one side and patches of green grass where the turpentine from the pines hadn't been able to kill it. The old wagon road curved by, but hardly anyone used it any more, and the place was solitary. Matt saddled the horses, the big red gelding and the old man's sorrel, and rigged out one of the pack horses. Jake had come up by then. It was

half an hour before they reached the main road and turned down the pass toward Deadhorse Flat.

It wasn't much more than that: a flat, wide valley with a bunch of shanties scattered under the timber at the edge of it, and a store, and a number of sluice boxes on the gravel banks near the river. At that lower altitude the sun was hotter, and a thick fog of dust lay in the air. Matt and the old man turned in toward the store and dismounted.

There were a dozen men on the porch and more inside. Some of them nodded and called out their greetings. One man, a tall, muscular Swede with a noticeably empty gun holster, was trying to edge away from them. He got as far as the watering trough and then changed his mind and sat down on it, hanging his head dejectedly. Jake studied him closely.

"That the fella that done it?"

"That's him," someone answered.

"He looks mean, all right," Jake observed dryly. "You men watch him, now. He's high-spirited."

Somebody laughed, and Carlson, the storekeeper, opened the door and let Matt and the old man inside. The place was full of smoke and everyone was sweating. Mrs. Carlson was heating water on the pot-bellied stove.

"I'm glad you could come, Doc," Carlson said. "It's Stutz Tolbert. He's over here."

Matt looked at the patient. "Just remember," he said without thinking of the words; it had become a ritual now. "I'm not a doctor any more. Not with a license anyway. It's supposed to mean something."

"Sure, Doc, we're not worried about a piece of paper."

Mrs. Carlson was beaming at him as he crossed the room. Her thin, gangling son peered out from behind her. Matt had treated him for a rattlesnake bite the month before. He had incurred the fat, stolid woman's unflagging gratitude.

They had laid Stutz Tolbert out on the counter with a flour sack under his head and a blanket over him. He was sweating profusely.

"Open some windows," Matt said. "How are you feeling, Stutz?"

"It hurts something awful, Mr. Kirby."

Matt smiled, as much in amusement as in sympathy. He knew the type. The man would lie out in the snow for a week, busted up and near freezing, without so much as a whimper. And bawl like a baby if he ever once suspected that help was around. Matt pulled the blanket off him and ripped open the pants leg. The bullet had merely passed through the flesh of Tolbert's calf, but now that the shock had worn off the pain was understandable. He called across the shoulders of the men crowded behind him.

"We won't need that water, Mrs. Carlson. Just a little cotton and some whisky. A pint ought to be enough. And some bandages."

Tolbert winced unrestrainedly. Matt glanced at Carlson. "Maybe you can spare a little for his insides, too."

Carlson brought a pint of whisky from behind the counter and opened it. "I hate to, though," he said. "That old fool don't deserve it."

Mrs. Carlson came with the cotton, and then slipped back to her place at the stove, abandoning the hot water reluctantly. Matt doused the wad with alcohol and gave the pint to Tolbert, who was sitting up now, watching.

"This will help some," Matt said. "But you ought to take him down to Doc Marriott, so the wound can be cleaned properly."

"I guess we can manage it," Carlson said, without enthusiasm. "The old fool. He don't deserve any help. A couple of women have been talkin' about comin' up here and openin' a business. Next spring, they said. But Tolbert here can't wait that long. So he and that dumb Swede were out buildin' them an all-weather cabin. Got to arguin' about whether it ought to have a window or not. The Swede was against it, and it looks like he won out. I'd of sided with him myself. Who ever heard of havin' a window in a place like that?"

Matt finished bandaging the wound. Tolbert heaved a sigh and lay down again, but being careful not to spill the whisky.

"He'll be all right," Matt said.

"We're obliged," Carlson said. "I don't know what we'd do, being so far from a doctor. . . ."

Matt went toward the door without letting him finish. He found the gratitude disturbing, even irritating. He had wanted to get away from it, away from everything, and even in this solitary settlement he hadn't come far enough.

The Swede was still sitting on the edge of the watering trough. The news had spread that Tolbert was all right, and nobody was bothering him

any more. But he stayed where he was, looking hangdog but probably still holding to his stand against the whorehouse window, and not paying any attention to the dust that the horses raised when Matt and the old man pulled back onto the road.

It was ten miles down to Colbyville. The road swept down the mountain in long, gradual curves. It was well-traveled below the settlement, and powdery underfoot. They passed side trails leading to other mining camps, with the names crudely lettered on signs nailed to the nearest trees: Mule Skinner's Flat, and Karber Flat, and one place called Frothman's Diggings. Few of them meant anything since the big mines had taken over. After they passed them the road grew steeper, and the last mile it dropped away so that they had to lead the horses to keep them from jamming up their forelegs. Colbyville was just below them. A few houses stood scattered out in the open country, but most of them were up along the high banks of the gorge. The place didn't look any different than it ever had, and Matt didn't pay any attention to the old man's grumbling.

"I don't know what there is about seein' a town," Jake said, "that makes me uneasy."

It was always strange to find that Colbyville hadn't changed, now that everything else was so different. Its narrow main street was still crowded and noisy; it was just six, and the whistles shrilled from the near-by mines, and an engine puffed and rattled at the depot a block away. Matt and the old man turned in at the nearest hitch rack and got

down. They were still a hundred yards from the store.

They shouldered their way down the plank sidewalk and turned into the open-fronted general store. Matt bought bacon and flour and two sacks of rolled barely while the old man nosed around the steel traps and firearms.

"The feed's poor up your way, is it?" Wilkins, the storekeeper asked.

"No worse than usual," Matt said. "How's the supply of venison?"

"I could use a half dozen, maybe. It don't keep well this time of year. Later, I'll want more."

"All right, we'll be down next week." He paid for the purchases. "I'll come around to the back to load up."

He left the store, the old man following behind him and then abruptly slipping out of sight in the crowd. He was headed for the Bighorn Saloon, Matt decided. He stopped on the sidewalk to roll a cigarette and light it. The town held no excitement for him; the roughness, the noise, the boisterousness no longer touched him. In three short months he had come to feel a stranger here, and in a way he was thankful. He had tried to keep the present separate from the past. It was impossible, of course. There were always memories, always reminders.

He tossed the cigarette away and was about to turn down the sidewalk when he saw her. He would never have gone toward her of his own will. But he had no choice. He was hemmed in, and the crowd had opened a little alley for her as she came

across the intersection, not jostling her as they might have jostled a camp woman or one of the wives from the back-town shanties. They could see she was different; not just her clothes, but the way she carried herself—serene and carefully oblivious. It was still possible that she would pass without seeing him, as impervious to him as to all the rest. But just the sight of her had already destroyed that comforting loneliness that he had felt just a moment ago. And at the last moment she turned her head and saw him.

"Matt."

"Hello, Judith," he said, and stood hoping that the crowd would separate them again. Of all the times that he had thought of her since that night in the big house, he had thought of her always without resentment. But now, face to face, he felt only that single emotion.

She saw that he wanted to leave, and moved closer to him. "Wait, Matt," she said. "Don't go yet. It's not fair. You've never given me a chance to explain."

He waited, not encouraging her, his face fixed and expressionless. His silence was a way of striking back at her. He realized it, and couldn't avoid the temptation.

"It's been three months, Matt. I tried to find you. I even sent a note. I guess you never . . ."

"I got it," he said, a little amazed at his own cruelty.

"But that night at the house, Matt. You must have heard me calling. I wanted to explain. . . ."

"There's no necessity," he said. He glanced beyond her to the crowd on the sidewalk, unaware, impersonal. He envied them. "What good was there in waiting," he went on casually. "You showed me how you felt. If you'd just said one word . . ."

"But, Matt, I tried."

"It was too late," he said, but for the first time doubt touched him. Had he been too quick, too angry? Could her silence have come not from disapproval, but merely from the shock of Emily's dying? He hadn't really given her a chance to speak.

"Please, Matt. Listen to me." And he was willing to listen now. "Oh, Matt. It wasn't the way you think. If there was anything I could have done . . . But don't you see, whatever happened, it doesn't matter. I wanted to tell you, Matt: I still love you. If you made some . . ." She saw the look that immediately crossed his face, and hesitated. The word—whatever word she had meant—stood like a barrier between them.

"Some mistake," he said, and all the anger was back, the resentment, the cruelty.

"Don't, Matt. Please. It doesn't matter."

But he wouldn't stop now. "Is that what you meant? If I'd made some mistake . . . You thought I was lying all the time, trying to cover up, but you're kind enough to overlook it now. Well, you're right about one thing. It doesn't matter. I don't want any part of your kindness and understanding."

If she meant to say anything else, it was like that other night; he didn't wait to hear it. It could mean nothing to him. He pushed his way from the sidewalk and crossed the street, going toward the batwings of the Bighorn Saloon.

But it wasn't as easy as simply walking away; the feeling of pain, of loss, stayed with him. And it must have shown on his face as he walked into the saloon. Jake didn't notice. But Doc Marriott, standing beside him, raised his eyebrows quizzically.

Matt motioned for another glass and poured from Marriott's bottle. The saloon was jammed; the girls had come downstairs early, the lookout was posted on his high chair, and the clicking of roulette wheels could be heard above the monotonous clatter of the piano. Matt stared in the mirror without seeing any of it.

"That's good Scotch," Doc Marriott said. He stood straight up at the bar, looking tall and stiff and dignified. "I had them order it special."

Matt poured another glass. Old Jake was drinking by himself, engrossed, ogling the girls through the back-bar mirror. Doc Marriott turned the bottle of Scotch and idly studied the label.

"So you've seen her, Matt."

Matt looked at him without surprise, then glanced away. Of course Marriott would have known. He'd probably seen it on his face. He seldom missed anything.

"Yes, I saw her," Matt said. "It doesn't matter." And the phrase jangled in his mind, like an echo.

Doc Marriott shrugged. He had always been a bachelor, and it was inconceivable, to him that a woman could be of more than momentary importance.

"Well, the whole thing's bad luck," he said after a moment. "But don't let it get you down. Henry Balfour's not the only man with influence. I've got a little of it myself. And I'll use it. Just give it a little time. We'll get your license back."

Matt didn't say anything. Doc Marriott stared reflectively down at his glass.

"I know you did all you could for that girl. I couldn't have done one whit better. Probably worse."

"You've told me that before," Matt said. "Six times. But it's nice to hear anyway . . . from somebody."

"You still thinking of pulling out?" Marriott asked.

"I don't know."

"I hope you don't," Marriott said. "There isn't any need to. They can't bother you any more."

But he was almost certain there was only one thing to do, to leave, to somehow drift ahead of the past. One place was like the next now.

"I'm being selfish about it," Marriott said. "These old hands aren't as good any more. They were never as good as yours."

It was selfish all right, and for a moment Matt was angry. "You can't hold me because of that. I didn't promise you anything."

"What about the patients?"

"I don't owe them anything, either. I lost that obligation when I lost my license. I lost the feeling. . . ."

It wasn't entirely true. The little back office surgery was a link with the past, and because of that he hadn't wanted to go there at first. He wouldn't have gone there at all, except that the old doctor had pleaded with him. It had been a case that he couldn't handle himself. And the next time Matt had resisted less, so that after a while the little surgery had become a habit, the one fragment of the past that he still clung to. He had become used to going up the darkened alley, slipping through the back door, and then afterward slipping out again, unseen, anonymous. And some of his courage had come back there, some of his confidence, and even some particle of satisfaction.

He finished the drink and straightened up from the bar. "I'm not sure," he said. "I'll be back to see you, though, whatever happens."

Old Jake was drunk and Matt had to urge him out of the saloon. It was still light outside, but most of the wagons had pulled out of the street. They led the horse around to the back of the general store and loaded on the supplies. Later, when they pulled up the steep grade of the road, the sun was going down behind the granite mountains. Matt stopped and glanced back at Colbyville. He'd seen Judith there, and it proved something. Old Jake's uneasiness about it hadn't been merely an old man's blatherings, after all.

5

Matt reined the red gelding up at the edge of the trees and got down. It was early morning; mist still rose from the river, and the birds were only just waking up in the little stand of willows. There had been no moon the night before, and he was sure to find deer grazing in the long meadow, or coming down to water. He left the horse's reins on the ground and followed the path along the giant deadfall. A spring oozed out of the ground, and deer had left their clear impressions. He rose up and saw them, two does and a buck. He ignored the buck, and leveled the Winchester on the larger doe. At the shot she sprang sideways and went down on her knees, then bounded up and dashed across the clearing. She was into the trees before he could lever another cartridge into the chamber. He heard her clatter across the rocks of the ford, and cursed softly.

It had been an easy shot, and yet he could explain how he had missed it. Judith had been in his mind all those three months, of course, but farther back, where her memory was only disturbing. Now, after seeing her yesterday, that memory was

bitter and painful. All the way down the old wagon road he had thought of her, all along the floor of the canyon, back in the trees where the horse was standing. And what memory had loomed up at the moment that he had made the half-hearted shot? He couldn't remember. There were too many of them to matter.

He crossed the river and saw where the doe had dropped her blood on the sandy bank. The blood was a reminder, as it had always been. Emily's blood. He tried to shut the thought out, but it stayed with him. Even when he forgot it, when he jumped the doe out of the brush without getting a shot, it came back again.

But the pain of Emily's death was all but gone now. Time had healed that. But time had seemed to do nothing to the other wounds.

Judith. Seeing her yesterday had only opened the wounds, gouged them deeper, so that he'd only been able to defend himself with anger and resentment. Standing there on the sidewalk he had almost told her about Amy and Brett Wilder, that final blow of truth. He no longer had any doubt that the woman in the window was Amy Balfour. Hadn't he seen the lie in old Hattie Tunstall's shrewd, pig-like eyes? When he questioned her the day after Emily's death, he'd had the feeling that he might have bought the truth if he'd had the price to pay.

He swung the red gelding uphill, across the rock ledges, circling. The doe would slow down, perhaps even stop, if he could make her think she

wasn't being followed. A jay called in the pines below. The hillside was quiet.

No, he hadn't had the price. And in the end it would have made little difference anyway. He couldn't tell Judith. Some sense of gallantry, excessive perhaps, held him back. And something else—pity. He didn't have the heart to place one sorrow right behind the last.

The doe was somewhere below him. He could see her tracks where she had crossed one of the little springs that came so mysteriously from the rocks. She was walking now, stopping to look back at her trail, looking for a place to rest. He swung the horse higher up the mountainside. The river was only a gentle rumble below him. Away from it, the wind had died to a whisper. The doe came out of the brush with a crash, running stiff-legged, and he slipped the Winchester from the scabbard. The shot took her behind the shoulder, and she ran a little way before she fell. She was dead when Matt got down to her.

Going back up the road he let the horse walk, holding to its tail. It was a dry and monotonous pull up the mountainside, and by the time he got to the cabin the heat had irritated him. He frowned at the man who was waiting for him.

He was a boy, really, not eighteen, a deaf-mute who ran errands for Doc Marriott. He smiled at Matt meaninglessly. Matt took the blank envelope, ran his fingernail along the wax seal, and opened it.

Dear Matthew,

I have a nephrectomy at Bridger's Falls. Am bringing him into surgery. Can you be there sometime around nine o'clock?

Will Marriott

It wasn't a question; Marriott knew he would come. Matt crumpled the letter and nodded to the boy. He watched him lead his horse out of the clearing, and then carried the carcass of the doe to a little cave in the side of the hill and hung it. By the time he got to Colbyville it would be too late to deliver it to the butcher. Old Jake was nowhere around. Matt left him a note and took the red gelding up the wagon road.

6

It was only slightly past eight o'clock when he got to Colbyville. The gelding was tired after the long ride, ten miles from the mountains, and he brought it through the back door of the livery and told the stable boy to feed and water it. He went up the alley, taking a long, circuitous route to the surgery. The place was dark. He slipped inside and struck a lamp and sat down to wait. Mrs. Trumbull opened the inner door and peered out at him.

She was a hatchet-faced woman of over forty, a soured widow with nothing left in her life but to keep house for Doc Marriott and sometimes assist in the surgery. The doctor had found it necessary to take her into his confidence, and she had accepted Matt readily enough, but with outspoken disapproval. She gave Matt a disapproving glance now and asked him what he wanted.

"I got a note from the doctor," Matt told her.

"He's not here. He's up at Bridger's Falls."

Matt smiled. "He asked me to be here by nine."

"All right. He may be late. It's a bad road from Bridger's Falls."

Matt stood up. "I haven't eaten yet. I'll be back at nine. You can send the boy down to the Bighorn if Marriott pulls in earlier."

He slipped out into the alley and closed the door, and heard Mrs. Trumbull's last sally: "The Bighorn's a mighty funny place to eat."

He wasn't really hungry. The same old tension had come into his stomach, a tension that he had always thought would someday go away. No matter what had happened, no matter how far he had retreated in three months from the person he once had been, that much was the same. He went out into the lighted main street and sauntered slowly along it. The town was old, and some of the roughness of a mining camp had worn off. Up where the gorge narrowed a few shade trees had been planted, and the white houses of the mine operators stood out in the darkness. He turned the other way, toward the brighter lights of the poolrooms and saloons and dance halls. He didn't expect to see her, and yet not seeing her, he was disappointed. He paused for a moment in front of the Bighorn, searching the street, before he went inside.

The piano rattled from the far end of the big room, but barely audible over the stomp of dancing feet. Most of the gaming tables were in use. Matt bought a cigar and leaned back against the bar to smoke it. A girl pushed through the crowd and came up beside him.

She had red hair, and a body that was perhaps a little too full-blown, and a dress that was too revealing. He could feel her thigh, soft, seemingly boneless, against his leg.

"Hello, Chris," he said.

"You don't want to dance, do you, Matt?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

Matt laughed. "I'll buy you a drink, though." He turned and called to the barkeep. The man started to put up a bright green cocktail, but the girl stopped him.

"No. Make it whisky." And then to Matt. "I wouldn't stick you for that cheap mouthwash. It's nothing but syrup."

"That's charitable," Matt said. "I always liked your honesty."

"What else?"

Her thigh came against him again, but he was neither feeling nor listening. He hadn't recognized Chad Balfour at first. In three short months he had grown; he was no longer a boy. He recognized Brett Wilder even before the man laughed, high and carelessly, and scattered his cards on the poker table.

"What else?" Chris said again. "You're not drinking."

"Too much last night," he lied, and studied Wilder. Emily's death hadn't changed him, he decided; there was still that quality of softness about him, that lazy, almost feminine grace, the eyes that always seemed slightly diverted. And the mouth, sincere and quick to smile.

"So. And where were you last night?" Chris was saying, teasing him, and yet half serious. "You doing your drinking somewhere else?"

"I was alone," Matt said. At other times, when

the loneliness had at last caught up with him, he had found some pleasure in her company. But now her light banter irritated him. The cigar had gone dead in his mouth, unnoticed. He had the sudden urge to walk across the room and face Brett Wilder. The same kind of urge that he had felt that night, when he'd seen Wilder go down, and his finger had begun to tighten again on the trigger. But he only stood there. He relighted the cigar. The deaf-mute came through the batwings, and stopped, and nodded at him.

"I've got to leave, Chris," he said.

She put her body against him provocatively. It wasn't out of place in the noisy, stomping atmosphere, but he couldn't help drawing away a little. He smiled at her in an effort to make up for it.

"Come back later," she said.

"I'll try." But the little room down at the end of the hall seemed far distant. "I'm not sure. I've got a really lousy hangover."

He left her, pushing out the batwings and going into the street. He paused to throw away the cigar. The batwings creaked again, and someone called to him.

"Kirby. Matthew Kirby."

He knew the voice. He stopped and turned around, for the first time acutely aware of the gun on his hip. Wilder and Chad were still on the sidewalk in front of the saloon. They came down into the street, the kid hanging back just a little bit, hesitant, uncertain.

"I was right," Wilder said. He was smiling. "It's Matt Kirby."

Matt tried to ignore him. He turned to the kid. "Hello, Chad."

"Hello, Matt," Chad said. He kicked at a nonexistent pebble.

He had changed, more than that first impression in the saloon had indicated. He had seen Matt as a hero once, someone to look up to; now he made no effort to hide his disappointment. He glanced everywhere along the street, as if there was nothing closer at hand to hold his attention.

"Well," Wilder said, composed, conversational. "I see you've come back."

"I haven't been anywhere," Matt said. It was the first time he'd seen Wilder since the night of Emily's death. And he regretted the meeting. Just seeing him again, hearing that smooth voice . . .

"Yes, I heard you were still around," Wilder said. "Up in the mountains. What brings you into town?"

"Supplies," Matt said. He turned, wanting to leave, but Wilder went along with him.

"I'm surprised that you haven't left the state, Kirby. Considering everything that's happened."

Matt didn't answer.

"Have you seen Judith?"

"That's none of your business, Wilder."

"No. Perhaps not. But then you don't see my point. You might think of the family, anyway. They're still upset. Seeing you around isn't going to help them forget."

Matt went toward him, then stopped. Wilder was smiling, and he remembered that smile. He saw Wilder now as he had never quite seen him in

the past. For all his faults the man was dangerously clever, and he had nerve. He stood there, knowing that Matt recognized the lies, and smiling with the same defiance as he had that night at old Hattie's road ranch. It was no different. He had struck out at that smile, and what had it availed him? There had been not the simplest pleasure in it. And afterwards his hands had felt soiled. Matt took out his watch and studied it in the dim light.

"I haven't got time, Wilder. Say what you want to say. Or are you finished?"

"I think I made it plain. You're finished in this town, Kirby. Why stay around any longer?"

"You're telling me to pull out, is that it?"

Wilder shrugged.

Matt brushed back the skirt of his coat. It seemed at that moment that he could no longer control his anger. His hand touched the butt of the Colt. Wilder's expression didn't change.

"Don't be a fool, I'm not armed."

"No, you wouldn't be." And it was just as well. He had come perilously close to killing him. And what would it have decided? Just one more death. And he was already held responsible for another. He brought his hand away from the gun and took out the watch again. Nine o'clock. He was late. He turned and went toward the alley.

"Think it over," Wilder called after him.

The alley was dark, with no lights showing anywhere except back at the opening of the street. There was no one to see him, and he walked quickly. He thought he heard a door open behind him—the side door of the saloon, probably—and

paid little attention. Then a long shadow stretched in front of him. He turned away from it, down a side alley filled with darkness. The shadow disappeared, but a moment later he heard footsteps. Someone was following him. Wilder? It seemed unlikely that the man had had time to enter the saloon and come out again. But he could take no chances. He made another turn and began to run. He was moving away from the surgery now, trying to circle. He went up another alley, and a dog barked, and a man squeaked open the door of a shanty and yelled at it. A loose fence board clattered somewhere back in the darkness, as though someone had leaned against it.

The alley ran out against the sheer wall of the gorge, and he turned left, past piles of rubbish and overflowing garbage cans. A man was lying drunk among them, a miner, probably, dragged there to be robbed. There was no sound behind him any longer. He cut to his left again, through a vacant lot, and came out on another alley. A few feet away a light shone through the curtained window of Doc Marriott's surgery.

Matt stopped, listening. Whoever had been following might still have him in sight. He waited. But it was well past nine o'clock now. He couldn't wait much longer. Finally he crossed the alley and ducked through the doorway of the surgery.

"Where the hell have you been?" Marriott demanded. "You're late."

"I know," Matt said. "But you were calling it pretty close."

"I said nine o'clock."

Matt took off the coat and gunbelt. "You said 'around' nine o'clock." He glanced at the man lying on the table. "What's the matter with him?"

"You remembered the 'around' all right," Marriott said. "You might have remembered the rest of it."

"I remember. A diseased kidney, wasn't it?"

"He's dying. If it was just myself, I'd have given up on him already."

Mrs. Trumbull dumped hot water into the basin, and Matt washed in it. The soured widow helped him on with the rubber gloves, and scowled at him.

"How are you tonight, Mrs. Trumbull?"

"Fine, thank you," she answered archly. "And I suppose you enjoyed yourself at that saloon?"

"I didn't eat," Matt said.

"I didn't think so."

"Shut up, Trumbull," Doc Marriott said. He wheeled over the little table and spread out the instruments. Everything was ready. Matt selected a scalpel and began to cut.

7

Brett Wilder saw the drunk lying among the rubbish and steered wide of him. He went on to the corner of the next alley and stopped. There was no sound except the sounds of the town: a door slamming, an occasional blare from one of the dance halls. He listened for a few minutes longer, and decided he had lost him. That loose fence board had given him away. But it was just as well. He put the gun back in the shoulder holster. It would have been unwise to risk a shot here in the heart of town, though he might have made it look like just another robbery, like that drunk lying back in the garbage pile. Still, he had learned something. Not much, perhaps. But what was Kirby doing in the back alleys of town? And why had he run when he discovered that someone was following him?

He found his way to the main street and unhitched the black stallion from the rack in front of the Bighorn Saloon. Through the window he could see Chad at one of the poker tables. Wilder smiled. The kid had been reluctant about poker at first, but he'd had a good instructor, and it was in his

blood now. Wilder left him to it. He should really go back into the saloon and explain his absence to the kid. But he could do it just as well later. He was tired. He kicked the stallion and rode out of town.

The big house stood by itself in one of the sheltered turns of the valley. There were no lights on, and he was glad. He wasn't in the mood for Amy tonight. The times when he was in the mood to see her had become less and less frequent.

He unsaddled the black horse and went into the house. He found a lamp and touched a match to it, and the light slowly penetrated the darkness. He straightened up and saw Amy sitting by the fireplace.

"I told you not to come tonight," he said irritated. "I told you I'd be busy."

"But you're not," she said. Her speech was a little thick. She'd been drinking. A bottle of bourbon and a half-filled glass stood on the hearth beside her.

"You know your way around here pretty well, to find that in the dark," he observed dryly.

"I ought to. I've been here enough." And then her face suddenly turned sober. "Brett, isn't there some other place we could meet? I don't like it here."

He knew what she meant. Emily's house. But they couldn't risk going to Hattie Tunstall's any longer.

"You're hitting that stuff pretty hard, aren't you?" he said crossly. "You never touched it be-

fore. Some night you're going to get home and fall down the stairs, and then you'll have some explaining to do. We all will. I lied our way out of it once. I may not be able to do it again."

"Please, Brett," she said. "Don't be angry. I know you didn't want me to come tonight. But I had to. I can't sleep any more, Brett. I keep thinking of Emily. If we hadn't been together that night . . ."

He looked at her in contempt. He was sick of her tears and self-recriminations. He went over to get the bottle. She poured herself another drink before she handed it to him.

"I'll give it back," he said. He filled a glass and stood watching her. Already her mood had changed, and he knew it was only to please him. She sat with her knees curled under her, and she had pulled up the skirt so that her knees showed under it. She meant him to notice. He did, for a moment forgetting his annoyance. It was that boldness that had always attracted him. And her youth; she had a ripeness that only a young girl could possess.

"Well?" she said. She pulled the skirt down over her knees, all the time watching him.

He shook his head. She's really a slut, he thought, so unlike the rest of the family. And perhaps that was the quality that fascinated him the most, that strange contrast, as though her background had been unable to tame something raw and savage inside her.

Her glass was empty, but he made no effort to fill it. He put the bottle down in front of him. "I

saw Kirby tonight," he said. "I almost killed him."

"But why?" she said. Her face was almost drained of color.

"Don't worry," he said. "I changed my mind—for the moment, anyway."

She sat up, intent, a little afraid. "But why?" she repeated. "Why consider it at all?" And then she sank back again, understanding. "You think he saw me that night."

"Maybe."

"But he wouldn't say anything. He hasn't said anything before. He wouldn't. . . ."

Wilder laughed. "Yes, I know. Honor and decency. He wouldn't want to drag your name through the mud. Well, maybe you're right. I don't like the idea of his hanging around here, though."

"Please be careful, Brett. We don't want any more . . ."

He knew what she meant. Any more deaths. But he was scarcely paying attention to her. A thought had occurred to him. He got to his feet.

"I'm going back to town. Where's your horse? I'll saddle it for you."

She stood up, watching him apprehensively. "No, it's all right. I left it in the brush. Anyway, don't go out now, Brett."

He went to the door, and she came after him. He tried to push her away, and she came closer, and he could feel her body against him, her breasts.

"Stay here."

He shook his head.

"Please, Brett."

"No."

"Then I'll wait."

He shoved her away angrily. "Go home," he said. "Hell, leave me alone." She was like a dog sometimes in her affection. He shut the door on her before he could hear the little sounds he knew she would make, the whimpering, the crying.

He moved casually up the street, paying close attention to the horses along the hitching racks. Most of them were broomtails, and he was sure that none of them belonged to Matthew Kirby. The man knew his horse flesh, if nothing else. He stopped and stood for a while, smoking and listening to the sounds of the night. A piano tinkled. A woman laughed, her voice coarse but somehow provocative and appealing. He thought of Amy. The slut. Perhaps he should have stayed with her just a little longer.

A sign down the street caught his attention—Proutt's Livery—and he went toward it. A lantern hung down from the doorway. A man was asleep inside the little office, and Wilder knocked on the glass of the door to awaken him. The man rubbed his eyes and came outside reluctantly.

"You want your horse, Mister?"

"No, I . . ."

"You want to rent a buggy, then. Two dollars a day, twenty dollars' deposit against the rig and horse."

"No. I was wondering . . ."

"Oh, you're Mr. Wilder, one of the men up at

the Shamrock Mine. Well, anytime the company needs a horse and buggy, Mr. Wilder . . . Say, where you goin'."

Wilder moved past him and up the aisle between the stalls. He stopped and struck a match.

"Look out! You want to set a fire?"

Wilder shook out the match and went farther into the darkness of the stable. Near the back he stopped and lighted another match and held it up. A big red gelding fidgeted in the stall. It was just a guess, but not entirely without reason.

"Whose horse is that?"

The man shrugged.

"It wouldn't happen to belong to a man who calls himself Matt Kirby?"

The stableman scratched his head. "It might. Yep, now that you mention it, that's his name. Kirby. He's got a nice animal there. . . ."

"Thanks," Wilder said. He left the stable and went up the street toward the Bighorn Saloon, thinking of Kirby. The man was hard to threaten. But he might listen to Henry Balfour. In the last analysis, he'd have no choice.

Chad sat by himself at a table at the back of the saloon. He fingered the mug of beer and stared at the crowd without seeing them. The poker had gone badly, and he was a little ashamed of himself. He thought of Brett's luck with cards, and envied him.

Still, there was an excuse for it tonight. He hadn't been able to keep his mind on the game. He kept thinking of Matt Kirby, and his thoughts

only served to confuse him. He should hate Kirby, he supposed. They all expected him to: his father, Brett . . . But he felt sorry for him more than anything else. It was a weakness, probably, as his father would be quick to point out. No backbone. He had always found it hard to hate anybody.

Brett Wilder came across the room, sliding skilfully between the tables. He slapped Chad on the shoulder.

"Lost again, kid?"

Chad nodded.

"How much?"

"That's just it. I didn't have very much. I owe fifty dollars to the dealer."

"Don't worry about it," Wilder said, sitting down. "I'll square it with him."

"Thanks, Brett. I appreciate it. I wouldn't know who else to ask."

Wilder laughed. "As long as you don't ask your father. He'd skin me alive."

Chad smiled gratefully. He owed a lot to Wilder: money, because he couldn't go to his father for it, and understanding. Brett'd never once mentioned that night when he'd stood helpless and let Kirby take the gun from his hand. And since Kirby had left town, he'd been his only friend. Perhaps it was because Brett needed someone to turn to, he thought, now that Emily was gone. Not that he had ever said anything; he'd kept his feelings to himself. But Chad could imagine the pain hidden behind the quick smile, the unconcerned laughter.

Wilder drummed his fingers on the table. "I've

been thinking about Kirby," he said after a moment. "I can't help it."

"I know," Chad said. "I'm sorry."

Wilder stared off across the room. "He's got his nerve. I thought he would have pulled out of here by now. If he had any decency. . ."

Chad didn't say anything. He felt uncomfortable. Decency. It was hard to think of Matt Kirby as lacking that quality. Still . . . He found Wilder staring at him.

"It's all right for us," Wilder said. "But what about the girls? And your father? Having him right here in town, as a reminder."

He was right, Chad thought. They had all expected Matt to leave the area. It was the only thing to do, for himself as well as for everyone else."

"But you can't make him go."

Wilder nodded. "Yes, we saw that tonight. If I'd just had a gun . . . But that's the trouble. I missed my chance. I could have killed him that night after Emily's death. I couldn't now. There's already been too much killing. But there's one way we can make him leave. We can take him up to see your father."

"I don't know, Brett. Maybe we ought to just let things alone. Maybe he'll pull out in a little while. He wouldn't see my father, anyway."

Wilder was staring at him again, and the dark searching eyes made him uncomfortable. "You've got a gun, haven't you, Chad?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"You don't have to come with me. I can do it by myself. I just thought you'd want to."

It was the last thing he wanted, and even Brett hadn't been able to understand that. They all expected something that he had no desire and no talent to fulfill. It made him a little angry, and hopeless. He got up from the table and, standing there, drank the last of his beer.

"All right," he said. He couldn't refuse. He knew how it would look to his father.

8

Matt strapped down the last of the bandages and drew the sheet up over the patient's body.

"Well?" Doc Marriott asked.

"I think he'll be all right," Matt said, drawing off the rubber gloves. "You'll know more tomorrow."

Mrs. Trumbull came in and wheeled the patient out. Matt sighed and watched Marriott pour out two cups of coffee. His nerves had let down suddenly, and he was tired now, but it was a pleasant tiredness. Marriott studied him.

"Drink that coffee. Or do you want something stronger?"

"No," Matt said. He didn't need whisky. For the first few moments, at least, nothing could enhance his mood. How easy it had been to forget this deep, quiet satisfaction.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Marriott said.

Matt nodded.

"I never could have done it," Marriott said. "That must make you feel even better. No, I never had the hands, even when I was young. And you're still figuring on pulling out?"

"I don't know. I saw Brett Wilder tonight, and Chad. They want me to." He didn't mention that someone had followed him through the alleys. It might have been Wilder. It might have been anybody. A mistake. He wouldn't have been the first man to be found sprawled on Colbyville's back streets, with simple robbery as the motive.

"They can't bother you. Not any more."

"Henry Balfour might."

"That pompous old bastard," Marriott said. "I'd hate to see you pull out. I could use you here."

"Without a license?"

"It's worked all right so far."

"And if somebody found out, if Balfour found out, you'd be in trouble."

"I'm not worried," Marriott said. "I've got a few friends up at the capitol myself. I can think of one in particular. A big family man, with one of those nasty little diseases. I'd never let out about him, of course, but he's never been able to quite convince himself that I wouldn't. I could get your license back after a while, by going to the right people."

Matt shook his head. "I don't know. I've come this far. Sometimes I think it's better to let it lie. I don't want to drag the girl into it. I never did."

"She seems like a strange kind of woman to be wasting your high-mindedness on."

"She was young. Telling about it now would ruin her. It would ruin Judith, too. It's too much to pay."

Marriott gulped the rest of his coffee and thumped the cup down on the table. "You've got

it all figured out. I guess you've got it figured out where you'll go when you pull out of here. You and that old coot, Jake Grisby. Spending the rest of your life splitting shakes. Or if business gets bad, you can always go down with the Chinamen and cut ties for the railroad."

"Maybe. There's nothing wrong with it."

"Nothing at all. Except that you should be doing something else. You owe it to yourself. No, you owe it to that man you just got through operating on. You took an oath, didn't you?"

"I thought the Medical Board invalidated that."

"Yes, you're right, they did. And I can't blame you for the way you feel. But think it over, Matt. We can keep on the way we've been going. And maybe later . . ."

"I'll think about it, Doc," Matt said. He got up and slipped into his coat and tied on the gunbelt. "I'll see you again, one way or another."

Marriott held the door open after he'd left, throwing a narrow shaft of light down the darkened alley. He was still standing there when Matt turned the corner toward the livery. In the back part of town the night was quieter. Even the sounds from the main street had become subdued. Matt pushed on the rear door of the stable and tensed at the screech of wheels on the rusty runner. He only got it half open, so that a little light came out from the lantern hanging over the front doorway.

"That's far enough, Kirby. Keep your hands right where they are."

Matt turned his head slightly and peered into the shadows. He saw Brett Wilder and somebody

else, Chad Balfour. The light flickered momentarily on Wilder's gun.

"What is it, Wilder?"

"Just stay there. Chad, get his gun."

The kid came up and slipped the Colt from its holster. He didn't look up, though in the darkness Matt could have read nothing on his face. He went back and stood a little apart from Wilder.

"All right, just keep ahead of us, Kirby," Wilder said. "We're going to pay a little visit to Mr. Balfour."

"He sent you here?"

"No. He doesn't know you're in town. Not yet. He won't be happy when he finds out."

They went down the alley, past the saloon, and into the street. The lights began to drop away behind them. In the upper part of town only one or two night lanterns burned behind the drooping elms. They turned in at the end of the street and went up the steps of the big two-storied house. The porch had been newly painted. A dozen millers thrust themselves blindly at the lantern.

They followed Chad into the narrow, dark hallway. Wilder put the gun away. A lamp burned in the study and they went toward it. Henry Balfour was sitting behind his long oak desk, reading. His thin face seemed especially austere in the half-light of the study; he was clean-shaven, and there was a pallidness about his skin, as if it had always been impervious to the sun and wind. He looked up.

"Hello, Brett, Chad." And then he put the book down. His body was as thin as his face, and without limberness. He got up slowly.

"Who's this?"

"Matt Kirby," Wilder said.

"So I see," Henry Balfour said. He had never been a man to allow himself the slightest show of emotion. If there was any reaction now, it was lost in the shadows of his face. He put a marker in the book and closed it. He sat down.

"Take a seat, Mr. Kirby."

"No, I'll stand," Matt said. "Whatever you've got to say, you can make it short. I didn't want to come here."

Balfour glanced questioningly at Wilder.

"We ran into him downtown, sir," Wilder said. "We didn't know he was still around here. We thought you ought to know. We thought you'd want to see him." His manner was careful, polite, and not quite obsequious.

"I'm glad you did," Balfour said. And then to Matt: "And I'll try to be as brief as possible, Kirby. I take it you intend to stay around here?"

"Maybe. I live about twelve miles back. On the pass. I don't come into town very often, if that's what might bother you." It was hard to keep the defiance out of his voice. At times like these it was easy to hate them: Balfour, Wilder, even Chad.

"It does bother me," Balfour said. He pursed his lips thoughtfully. He was trying to be fair; he had always been scrupulously careful within his own, hard, inflexible standards. "And you can see why. I had no idea you'd stay around here. You're a stubborn man, Kirby, and I can't tolerate it. I have to think of my family. Being in the same area . . . It's a situation that can't continue."

Matt laughed, humorlessly. "And what's the solution, Mr. Balfour? You'd hardly be the one to leave here."

Balfour gazed at the desk for a long time, as though he had once actually considered it. "My business keeps me here," he said at last. "I doubt that we could be persuaded to move again."

"Then that leaves it up to me," Matt said.

"Not entirely. Depending on your choice."

Matt strode angrily to the desk and leaned down on it. The sudden move brought Wilder's hand toward his shoulder holster. Matt straightened up again and stared at him.

"I've been told to get out of town before, Mr. Balfour," Matt said. "I'm getting sick of it."

Balfour sat quietly, unaffected. "Then I hope once more will suffice."

It was enough, of course. He had already made up his mind to leave, and neither Balfour nor Wilder had anything to do with the decision. Judith did. He had never gotten used to being without her, but somehow he had made her absence bearable. Being at all close to her now, even being in the same house, had spoiled all that. No, he would leave; he had to.

"I hope you come to the right conclusion," Balfour said. "I wouldn't want to . . ."

"I know," Matt interrupted him. "You don't have to say it. You have influence, you showed me that before. Is that all? Are you through now?"

"That's all," Balfour said. Already he had started to pick up the book.

Matt turned and walked over to Chad. "I'll take that gun now."

The kid brought it from his waistband and handed it over, his look almost apologetic. Wilder was standing near the doorway. Matt stopped close to him.

"I'll make up my mind," he said. "You'll know about it. If you come looking for me again, it won't be so easy. It won't be the same at all."

Wilder said nothing; a slight smile played at one corner of his mouth. Matt brushed past him and went to the door.

She was standing on the porch, waiting for him, but he didn't see her at first. He stopped to roll a cigarette, and then the light from the match penetrated the shadows. She was wearing a long, sheer nightgown. With only a shawl over her shoulders.

"Matt?"

"What is it?"

"Come over here, away from the lantern. They'll see you."

He went over to her and stood leaning against the porch railing. "That would bother you, wouldn't it, Judith?" he said coldly.

"What?"

"If they saw us together."

She didn't answer. In the darkness he could feel her watching him. "What did he want, Matt?"

"Your father? Nothing much. He wants me to get out of town, out of the area. He was polite about it. I ran into Brett and the kid. They had the same idea. I guess they thought it would sound more threatening if it came from the old man."

"You can't blame them for the way they feel."

"No, I suppose not." He couldn't blame Judith or Chad or old Henry Balfour. It was his own silence that had condemned him. He couldn't blame Brett or Amy either, at least no more than he could blame himself. Anything he had done, in the last analysis, he had done of his own free will. And there were times, like this moment now, when that act of flamboyant chivalry seemed hardly worth the cost, when his silence seemed the result of pure obstinacy instead. Certainly Judith had more than once suspected some half-truth. She stood facing him now with the tenseness of expectancy, not quite sure what she was waiting for, and waiting nonetheless.

"You haven't answered me, Matt."

"What."

"Are you leaving?"

She hadn't asked the question before, of course; it hadn't been necessary. He knew the answer, and hesitated to give it. She was standing very close, and in that moment he could have taken her in his arms and kissed her. He could smell her perfume. In the dim light he could see the shadow of her body under the sheer nightgown, the swell of breasts that the long straight folds couldn't hide. She might have wrapped the shawl more modestly, and hadn't. She hadn't taken the time; she was too straightforward and honest to have bothered. He reached one hand out toward her and then let it fall again. He straightened up from the railing.

"Yes, I'm leaving," he said. "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"No, I was hoping . . ."

"You made yourself clear enough before," he said. It was cruel, and yet he knew that without cruelty he could never leave her.

"I was hoping . . . Don't you see, Matt, if you stayed, if you fought back, I could believe there was some explanation for what happened. I know there is, something that you haven't told. But going away, it's like admitting that everything they said is true. Is that what you want me to believe?"

He hesitated. She was giving him an opportunity that he had never asked for, not knowing that he couldn't take it. He knew how it would seem to her if he refused it. The cigarette had burned down, and he flipped it across the railing. Both of them watched the glowing tip as it arched out onto the lawn.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you made up your mind a long time ago. I can't stay here. I wish I could."

There was no use in asking her to understand. It wasn't understanding that he wanted. There was nothing to say that would mean anything to her. Nothing short of the truth, that one truth that he had always spared her. He went along the porch and turned down the walk. At the gate he looked back and she was still standing there. Far down the street the lights of the town blinked into the darkness and he walked toward them.

9

Dawn was breaking as Matt drew near the cabin, although the sun hadn't yet climbed high enough to filter through the trees. A squirrel fidgeted near the doorway, waiting for scraps. The old man came out and threw it a few crumbs. A slate-blue jay sailed across the clearing.

"Where the hell you been?" Jake Grisby asked, and followed him over to the stable. "I was worried, you goin' off that way."

Matt smiled. "Just lay awake all night, didn't you? I left you a note. You can read."

The old man fumbled in his pocket and took out the note. " 'Gone to town,' " he read. "That's some note. You didn't strain yourself, figurin' out the wording."

Matt unhaltered the red gelding and gave it a feed of grain. He brought in two pack horses from the pole corral and saddled them.

"Some woman, I guess," Grisby went on, not holding back on his early morning crotchetiness. "That's the only way I can account for it. Some low trull that I ain't heard about yet. That's the trouble. We been partners three months, and I

don't know no more than when we started. It's a fine thing when you can't trust your partner. . . . Say, what are yuh plannin' to do with them pack horses?"

Matt gathered up the alforjas and led the pack horses over to the doorway of the cabin. "I'm pulling out," he said. "I've seen enough of this country."

"Pullin' out?" the old man said in a hurt tone. "Why, we ain't even talked it over."

Matt dropped the packs and looked at him. Their partnership had meant more to the old man than he had ever suspected. It had meant something to him, too. It was true that they knew little about each other, and that was one of the advantages. There had been no picking at the past, no questions asked, and yet the friendship had been more than casual. They had some ingredient in common that they could feel, without making the mistake of trying to find out what it was.

"We'll talk it over," Matt said. "You want to come along?"

Grisby shrugged. It wasn't that he had any real objections; it had come on him too suddenly. "What about all those shakes we cut?"

"There aren't many. We can get a few dollars for them by selling them where they stand."

"And the deer meat," Grisby said. "I got three yesterday. That makes four altogether. You ain't going to leave it to rot."

"We'll go by Colbyville," Matt said, "before we pull out over the pass." He didn't want to. The venison could always be sold at Deadhorse Flat.

But he had promised Will Marriott that he would say good-by. He owed him that much, at least.

The old man glanced wistfully around the clearing. "All right, I'll go. I don't blame yuh. This country's no better than any other. I hate to leave this place, though. I always liked it. No people to bother you. . . ." He stopped and glanced sharply at Matt. "That's the trouble, ain't it?"

Matt didn't say anything.

"That's it, all right," Grisby went on. "More people crowdin' in all the time, and the other day you met one yuh know. I could tell. I could see it on your face."

Matt went into the cabin, and the old man followed him.

"You don't have to tell me. I know. I've had the same feeling myself, plenty of times." The thought of leaving the place had made him sentimental and self-deprecatory at the same time. He went over to the table and picked up a bottle. It was uncorked. He'd been using it the night before. He took a long swallow and watched Matt pack his sparse belongings. He went on talking again in a monotonous, sing-song voice.

"Yessir. I know how you feel. I'd be ashamed if I met up with somebody I used to know. I been lucky so far." He paused and glared at Matt's back. "You want to know what happened, don't yuh?"

Matt shook his head.

"You might as well pull my duds down while you're at it," the old man said. "It don't matter. I'll tell yuh anyway. I ain't never told anybody before, and maybe it's about time that I did. I killed

her. I didn't mean to, but that don't cut no ice; the result's the same. We were livin' in Montana then, up by the Milk River. Good cattle country, but no place for a woman. I loved her all right, but I guess I never showed it. All I had a mind for was gettin' ahead, raisin' bigger and better cows, and worryin' that some wild crittur would get in with the calves, and finaglin' for more winter feed so that I could run more cattle. It was lonely for her, but I couldn't see it. I came in this night, and there was a stranger in the yard, some saddle bum, and he was playin' a guitar and singin' at her. It was all innocent enough. She was a good woman. But I saw red. I cut down on him, and it was dark, and I never once thought of her standin' on the porch behind him. I missed. She was dead before I ever got a chance to tell her how sorry I was. She had some folks, and they came lookin' for me. Maybe they never quit. But that don't matter either. They couldn't make it much worse. I don't need 'em to remind me."

He set the bottle down and said nothing more. Matt finished packing the alforjas and looked at him. So that was it. They had something in common, but the old man had the worst of it. He had only been trying to get ahead, with no idea of what it was going to cost him. It showed how far a man could stray, even with the best motives. Was it true of himself? He wasn't sure. He had never doubted his motives; but they had cost him more than he had ever expected to pay.

He took a whisky bottle out of one of the packs and set it on the table. "That's the last one," he

said. "I'll take the venison into town and be back sometime tonight or tomorrow. We can finish packing then, and head out over the pass. Maybe we won't go at all. I'm not sure any more."

"Be careful," Jake said, and reached for the whisky bottle. He was still sitting at the table when Matt loaded the venison on the pack horses and pulled out. The old wagon road was warm. The sun had climbed above the trees and the woods were quiet. He hadn't made up his mind about anything. But he kept thinking of those few minutes on the porch with Judith, and urging the pack horses along faster than he should have.

It was late afternoon when he turned into Colbyville and rode up to the back of the general store. The butcher came out and helped him haul the venison into the cold cellar. He was a big German, with a pink, glowing face and only a fair command of the language.

"*Gott,*" he said, wiping his brow and humping down on a block of ice. "Maybe it get cooler pretty soon. Maybe not. You want money? Or put it on credit, like always."

Matt hesitated. Despite the long idle hours in the saddle, he hadn't been able to come to any decision. The butcher was forcing one on him now, without being even slightly aware of it. If he took the cash, he wasn't coming back here again. He lighted a cigarette and stepped out into the sunlight.

"Put it on the book," he said. After all, he could always come back in a little while. They would

need supplies to get over the pass. He left the horses standing in the shade and walked up toward the main part of town.

It was cooler at the upper end of the street, under the elms and the broad willows. He got as far as the gate and stopped, and for a while merely gazed at the big white house. No answer came into his mind that would stay there. He tried to think of what Doc Marriott had said, "You owe it to yourself, Matt. No, you owe it to that man you just got through operating on." He owed something to Judith, too. But what? He had always tried to protect her from the truth. Was there any reason to stop now, just because he had listened to an old man's drunken snivelings? He lighted another cigarette, and the smoke burned his mouth. The front door of the big house opened, and Chad Balfour came down the path.

Matt watched him open the gate, and he thought, It's still not too late. I can still back out, make some excuse: I was just passing by. Chad nodded to him, and he said, "Is Judith here? I wanted to see her."

The kid stood hesitating, swinging the gate with his hand and keeping his eyes down.

"It's not much to ask," Matt said.

"All right," Chad said sullenly. "I'll do it, this once. But don't expect it again. Go around to the back, to the stable. I'll send her there. You wouldn't want my father to see you."

Matt waited until the kid had gone up the path again and the front door had closed behind him. Then he followed the road around to the back

yard. There was no one about. A sorrel mare in the box stall turned her head to look at him.

After a minute he heard the gravel crunch, and recognized her footsteps. She stopped in the doorway, blocking the light, and trying to find him in the darkness.

"Over here," Matt said.

She saw him and came over, close enough so that her perfume mingled with the sweet, musky smells of the stable. Close enough so that he could have kissed her, and didn't. Perhaps later. There was something that had to be finished before he could do anything else.

"What is it?" she said. She was a little breathless, and the closeness of the house made her whisper. "I thought you were leaving."

"I was," he said. "Maybe I still am. I'm not sure. What you said last night . . . you're right. There's something I haven't told you. I didn't want to. It was something I couldn't prove, and I wasn't sure that anyone would believe me. Your father wouldn't. And I guess I thought you wouldn't either. . . . No, it wasn't that. I didn't want to hurt you. . . ."

She was silent. The mare fidgeted in the box stall. Matt took a deep breath, and went on.

"It's my fault. I wanted you to believe me, and didn't give you a chance. I should have told you everything. It would have been better in the long run. That night . . . you remember I told you what Emily said. 'I know who she is. . . .' And there was something else. She said, 'My own . . .' Amy wasn't home that night. She was with Brett Wilder."

He expected some answer, some exclamation, and didn't get any. He couldn't see her face in the shadows; he wasn't even sure that he could hear her breathing.

"I didn't want to tell you before," he said. "I knew what it would mean to you. I'm sorry. If there'd been any other way . . ."

And then something made him pause, some premonition in her silence, some knowledge that his words had seemed cheap and meaningless to her. He hadn't expected it to turn out that way, but he'd been a fool to expect anything else. He had expected pity for Amy, and she hated him instead. He saw her hand come up—he could see that much in the darkness—and made no move to step away. There was even some pleasure in the sharp pain. She'd gone as far as she could go. She couldn't hurt him any more. She turned and walked out of the stable before he could say anything, and it didn't matter. He had said all to her that he'd ever had to say.

He went down the street and turned up toward Doc Marriott's, not hurrying; there was no reason to hurry for anything any more. The town was beginning to come awake from the long afternoon of somnolence. Gamblers strolled along the sidewalks, sunning themselves, and blinking against the unfamiliar glare of daylight. A woman's voice rose, coarse and raucous, from the upstairs of the Bighorn Saloon. The constable was detaching himself from the bench in front of the jail and handing over his keys to his youthful deputy. In an hour the

workers would come streaming down from the big mines on the hill.

The back door of the surgery was unlocked, and Matt opened it and stepped inside. He could hear Mrs. Trumbull moving about the front part of the house. In a moment she peered in at him, her long face stern and unyielding.

"Well?"

"Is the Doc here?"

"No."

"I guess I'll wait then," Matt said. "How long will he be?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Trumbull said. She made no effort to disguise her hostility. "He's out on a case. There's no tellin' when he'll be back."

"I'll wait," Matt repeated. "I wanted to say good-by."

"It's about time," Mrs. Trumbull said, drawing her head back through the door and closing it.

Matt sat listening to the distant noises of the town. The sun had left the deep, narrow gorge, and it would be dark soon. He pulled the shades and lighted a lantern. Voices came from the front of the house, and he listened to them.

"Where's the Doc?" The voice was deep and gruff and demanding. "I got to see him."

"He's out."

"The girl's sick. I got to see him. . . ."

Matt opened the door a crack and looked down the hall. The man had shouldered his way past Mrs. Trumbull and was casting to right and left. In the confines of the narrow hall he looked gigan-

tic; the child in his arms seemed weightless. The woman following him, his wife probably, came barely to his shoulders.

"I've got to find him. . . ."

Mrs. Trumbull planted herself in front of him again. "What's wrong? Stop your stupid roaring and tell me what's wrong."

"I don't know," he said. His voice was quieter, and he looked at Mrs. Trumbull desperately. "She's sick, complainin' about her belly and hollerin' and throwin' up all night so that I didn't get a minute's sleep. I figured she'd be better this mornin', but she wasn't. And when I came home from work . . . By God, you got to do something."

"Give me the child," Mrs. Trumbull said.

"No." His eyes rounded suddenly, and he stepped back, stumbling into his wife. "No, by God, I want to see the Doc."

"Give me the child," Mrs. Trumbull repeated, advancing on him. "You stupid galoot. You think she's comfortable, hanging there like a rag doll? I'll put her in the bedroom. Then I'll try to get the doctor. And after that . . . I'll beat the whaley out of you if you don't give me that child. I'm liable to anyway, even if you do."

He gave her up reluctantly and followed Mrs. Trumbull into the bedroom. Matt closed the door. He smoked a cigarette and paced silently about the little surgery. For a while the only sound in the house was the quiet moaning of the child. There were other sounds from outside: the hiss and rattle of the train as it started its night run to Del Oro; the clatter of a late teamster's wagon; the

soft rumble of a dynamite explosion at one of the mines; the awakening tinkle of the honky-tonk pianos. He went to the window and parted the curtains to look out. There were shadows in the alley now. Something moved in the darkness near the board fence across the way; a dog, probably, he decided, or an early drunk fumbling his way homeward. Voices came from the front of the house again, and he went to the door and slid it open.

The deaf-mute messenger had come into the hall. Mrs. Trumbull took the note and read it while the father hovered anxiously over her.

"He'll be here in a little while," she told him. "He's delivering a baby. He said he'll hurry."

"By God . . ."

"I'll by God you. Sit down," Mrs. Trumbull said, and pushed him ahead of her into the sitting room.

The house was quiet again. Matt opened the door wider and went carefully down the hallway. A lamp glowed palely near the girl's bed. She was barely six. Her face was white and drawn, and there were little blotches under her eyes where the tears had dried, but she wasn't crying any longer. She moaned and pulled her knees up under the coverlet. Mrs. Trumbull spoke in a harsh whisper from the doorway.

"What? You've got no right in here. They'll hear you."

"Be quiet," Matt said. He had never been in the front part of the house before, and he felt ill at ease there. But her indignation irritated him. He pulled the coverlet down and touched the girl's abdomen. She groaned.

"You've got no right . . ."

"Shut up," he said, turning on her. "When's the Doc coming back?"

"I don't know. It's Mrs. Steiner. Her baby's come early, and she's having trouble."

"Did you tell him what it was?"

"No."

"It's appendicitis, acute." He had found out all he wanted to know. The signs were unmistakable. He looked down at the child, and her eyes were open and staring up at him. He ran his hand gently across her head; her hair was damp and matted.

"You'd better take her into the surgery."

"Why? You've got no right. If somebody should find out. It's not you I'm thinking about. But the doctor . . ."

"We can't wait," Matt said, trying to be patient. "It's got to be taken out. The Doc would want it that way, wouldn't he?"

She thought about it for a minute, glaring at him all the time, and then nodded. She was willing to back down, without relinquishing any of her ill-will or distemper. "All right," she said. "It's the best we can do, I guess. It's not very much. Get out of my way. Get back in the surgery before somebody sees you."

He went back and began to get the instruments ready. Mrs. Trumbull came in carrying the girl, having no more trouble with her than the father had, and laid her carefully on the table. The girl let out a high, wailing cry. In the front room a chair scraped, and they could hear the father fumbling his way along the hall.

"He'll come barging in here in a minute," Mrs. Trumbull said. "I'd better stop him. What'll I say?"

"Tell him you're just getting her ready," Matt said. "Or tell him the Doc's come back. Tell him he came in the back way, and doesn't want to be disturbed. Tell him anything. Just keep him out of here."

She went out, closed the door firmly, and he could hear her voice plainly enough. It was louder and rougher than the father's. She backed him gradually down the hall, and the chair scraped again. Matt took off his coat and gunbelt and scrubbed his hands. He picked up the ether cup. The girl let out another soft moan when he bent over her.

10

Brett Wilder stood in the shadows near the board fence and pulled up the collar of his coat. The night wasn't especially cold, but he'd been there better than an hour now, hardly moving. Just a while longer, he thought. It might turn out to be worth it.

It was merely curiosity that had drawn him there at first. He had seen Doc Marriott's buggy roll out of town just before sundown, and later Matt Kirby had come up the alley and slipped through the back door. There was nothing unusual in it, perhaps. It meant nothing by itself. But when he put certain things together . . .

It was strange that a man like Matt Kirby would use a back alley. And it wasn't the first time. That night his shot had gone wide of the mark, hadn't he lost his trail somewhere near this very spot? No, it was more than coincidence. There was something more than friendship for Marriott that brought Kirby sneaking around in the dark. It had started only as a hunch, and the more he stayed here, the more it seemed worth playing out.

From where he stood he could see part of the

front porch. He had seen the miner come up carrying the child, his wife scurrying along behind him, and go inside. And a few minutes later someone had parted the curtains of the back room and looked out. Whoever had opened them was careless about closing them again. There was a thin stream of light in the alley that hadn't been there before.

He waited five minutes more, and then stepped cautiously toward the windows, stopping each time a shadow moved across the curtains. The alley was silent. No sound could be heard from inside. He stepped closer and peered through the tiny crack of light. He could see only a small part of the room, and that was enough. He moved back again and smiled, and strolled leisurely down the alley toward the street.

There was a light burning on the front porch and the miner was standing under it, oblivious to the millers that were circling just above his head. Wilder walked up the steps and stopped beside him. The man looked up, nodded, and let his glance drop back to the toes of his boots.

"Good evening," Wilder said. "I suppose the doctor isn't back yet."

The man gave him a glum and preoccupied stare. "Yeah, he's back."

"Oh?" Wilder said. He let it go at that and strolled along the porch. The man's gaze followed him for a moment. He came back to where the big miner was standing and slipped a bright silver flask from the inside pocket of his coat.

"You look like you could use a drink, man. Is there something wrong?"

"It ain't me," the miner said. "It's my girl. Her belly's been hurtin' since way past yesterday. I don't know what's wrong. The Doc's workin' on her now."

Wilder handed him the flask and watched him drink. "You say the doctor?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't think he was here. I saw him leave town just before sundown."

"Come in the back way, I guess," the miner said. He drank determinedly, some of the whisky lapping over his mouth and down his chin. Wilder glanced casually along the lighted street.

"Are you sure about the doctor? I don't think he's here."

For a moment the big miner stood open-mouthed. Then the flask slid from his hand and he grabbed Wilder by the front of his shirt and swung him against the wall.

"Whadda yuh mean? What the hell you talkin' about? By God . . ."

Wilder checked a smile and stared into the dumb, vacant eyes. "You heard what I said. Go see for yourself. Ask the nurse. Just take your hands off me."

The miner let go. His wife had come to the door, and he brushed past her. Wilder picked up the flask, wiped it off, and screwed on the top. He went down the steps, smiling now, and turned down the street.

11

The air was growing warm in the little surgery, and Matt could feel the beads of perspiration beginning to form on his brow. He wiped them off with the inside of his upper sleeve. The sweat was his one concession to nervousness; his hands had never been steadier. He clamped down on the intestine, exposed the swollen appendix and began to cut. Mrs. Trumbull's face hung just above him, gray, watchful undisturbed. Only her eyes rolled backward at the sound that came from the front of the house. She swore under her breath, and then straightened up just as the miner flung open the door.

"Where is she?" he shouted. "Where's my baby. Where's my girl?"

He stood with his arms hanging, his eyes swinging about the room as though blinded by the bright lights, until they finally fell on the girl. The color in his face drained to a watered-down paleness, and a choking sound came up from his throat. He lunged at the table, and Mrs. Trumbull stepped in front of him.

"Get out," she said. "It's all right. Can't you see we're operating?"

"Get out!" he yelled. He didn't pay any more attention to her, except to try clumsily to push her away. "Like hell I'll get out. Who is he? Where's Doc Marriott? Whadda you doing to my girl?"

Matt spoke without looking up. He had finished cutting, and the blood was beginning to seep. He plucked the sponge from Mrs. Trumbull's hand. "She'll be all right. Her appendix was bad. We had to take it out."

But the miner didn't believe it. He stumbled around the table, weak from fear and anger, and made the choking sound in his throat again.

"Stop it. You ain't any doc. By God, I want you to stop. . . ."

He grabbed Matt by the shoulder and spun him around. Mrs. Trumbull let out a shrill scream and grabbed at the table. Matt hit him with all his strength, forgetting that he still held the sponge, seeing the blood from it splatter against the man's face. The miner stepped back, rubbing his jaw and giving his eyes time to focus. Then he came at Matt head down, driving him against the wall. Matt felt the wind rush from his lungs. He brought his knee up and missed, and the miner's hands came for his throat. Mrs. Trumbull's piercing shout stopped them both.

"All right. That's enough. You'll be on that table yourself, if you don't do like I tell you." She had slipped the Colt from the holster; she was waving the muzzle in a loose, careless circle. "Now get out of here. This girl will get well if you leave

her alone. If she don't . . . you'll have me to answer to for it."

The miner started backing toward the door, took a long step toward her, and held back in mid-air. She had drawn back on the hammer and was starting to close her eyes. He wheeled quickly and went stomping down the hall.

"There goes trouble," she said, and slid the Colt into the holster. "You get washed up. I'll try to stop the bleeding."

She had it almost stopped by the time he had finished scrubbing and came back to the table. He took the sponge from her while she washed and prepared a suture. He felt the child's pulse; it was weak, but steady. Except for her quick, shallow breathing, the room was silent. There was no sound from outside; the front of the house was quiet.

Mrs. Trumbull noticed him listening. "Good riddance," she said, handing him the suture.

"He'll be back," Matt said. "We haven't seen the last of him."

"Don't worry," she said. Her voice for once had softened. "I'll hold him off. You can pull out of here. You were leaving anyway."

He tied off the last suture and straightened up and handed her the needle. "We'll close up that opening now." He couldn't pull out now, not for a while, at least. He had made the decision about the girl, and if it had been worth doing at all, it was worth standing up for afterward. He had learned that much, at least. "No, if I leave now, it'll throw everything on the Doc. He could take it, I guess. But I wouldn't want him to."

She sighted down on the needle, finally got the exterior suture threaded through it, and gave it to him. For a moment they both stood listening.

"What is it?" she said at last.

"Somebody on the town, maybe," he said, and bent over the incision.

"No. It's not that. I don't like it."

The sounds came from the alley now, and no longer from the front of the house. They could hear voices, and now and then the excited nicker of a horse, and a light flashed sharply against the curtained windows. Mrs. Trumbull crossed the room and looked out.

"He's come back," she said. "The stupid lummox. He's brought half the town with him."

Matt finished closing the incision and prepared a bandage. He looked down at the girl. She was beginning to wake up; her head rolled from side to side and her lips moved soundlessly. He covered her with a sheet and put on his coat and buckled up the gunbelt. Mrs. Trumbull was still at the window; the sounds in the alley had grown louder. He walked over and stood beside her and looked out.

All their faces seemed distorted by the weird reflection of the torches. There were twenty or thirty of them, jamming the narrow alley, and more seemed to be coming. The big miner stood up near the front, with the youthful deputy constable beside him. He seemed less sure of himself than he had before, as though not quite comprehending what he had started. He kept looking back at the

crowd and blinking. This time Mrs. Trumbull swore audibly.

"I can hold them off," she said. "You go out the front. There doesn't seem to be anyone out there yet. There will be, though, if you don't hurry."

"No," Matt said. He went to the door and looked back at the girl on the table. "Just take good care of her until the Doc comes. Watch the bandages, and see that her temperature stays down. I wouldn't want anything to happen now."

He had the feeling that this had been his last case, not because of the crowd outside and anything it might do to him; but the string had obviously run out. He was sorry for it, and took one last look at the little surgery. He had never been happy there, and yet he hated to leave. There was some satisfaction in the warmth that he saw in Mrs. Trumbull's usually unyielding face. He smiled at her and opened the door and went out.

"That's him," the miner shouted. "That's the man. You've got to arrest him."

He must have surprised them. They probably hadn't expected him to come outside without a lot of hammering insistence, and none of them moved for a moment. The youthful deputy finally hauled his revolver out from under his coat, fumbled it, and trained it on Matt's belly.

"Don't move," he snapped. "You're in trouble, mister."

He jiggled the gun and tried to think of something else to say. He wasn't much over twenty, and unsure of himself, but it was easy to see how

he had gotten the job. There was no demand for it. The job didn't pay anything, and it meant prowling the sidewalks most of the time, and being jostled and browbeaten by drunken miners the rest. The youth made a show of holding the crowd back by sticking out one arm, and edged in a little closer.

"You're in trouble," he said again. "You had no right messin' with that little girl."

"I'm a doctor," Matt said. "You know that."

"Not any more, you ain't. You lost your license. We know something else, though. We know what happened to Mrs. Wilder."

"You're a fool," Matt said, but no one seemed to hear him. The youthful deputy didn't. He had looked for more opposition, and the lack of it encouraged him. He turned to the miner and waved the gun authoritatively toward the door.

"Go see how she is. We'll have to know, before we decide anything."

The door of the surgery was locked now, and it took a while before Mrs. Trumbull finally came to open it. The big miner barged inside, and Matt could hear them arguing. He let his glance slide disinterestedly over the crowd. It was no different than he had expected: day-shift miners mostly, and a few cowboys taking a holiday from summer grazing their cattle down in the big meadows, and three or four store clerks, a little more respectable than the rest, and trying to look it. There was only one man who seemed out of place. He was standing at the back, leaning against the board fence on the other side of the alley, and it wasn't until some-

body raised a torch that Matt recognized him: Brett Wilder.

It meant something, but Matt didn't have a chance to think it over. The big miner came staggering weakly from the surgery, looking dazed, and mumbling.

"She's dyin'. I know she is. I ain't never seen her that way, all pale and white and not movin'. She won't talk to me. If I'd known . . . If only . . ."

His ignorance was understandable. The operation had taken something out of her; she was more drawn and lifeless than before, and he hadn't expected it. Matt started to explain, and never got a chance. The big miner came at him, and the crowd suddenly broke past the youthful deputy and surged around him.

He went down on his knees at the miner's first blow, and got up again. He could hear the deputy's voice above all the rest. "We're takin' him to jail, boys. We'll let the law take its course. Come on, grab him."

The deputy might have believed that they meant it that way; it didn't matter. He disappeared and came up again beside Matt, clutching for his arm. Matt shook him loose. He spat the blood from his mouth and met the miner as he rushed in, swinging his knee toward the groin. Somebody hauled him back. A fist jarred against his temple and he thought he was going to fall, and didn't. He went halfway down, and then they held him there. He felt himself being dragged down the alley, the dust coming up into his face, a dozen knees striking him as they walked, and the youthful deputy persist-

ently at his side. "Take him to jail, boys. We'll let the law take its course." And another voice yelling, "Get a rope," and someone else, closer and unheard, answering that he already had one.

He got his feet under him after a while and tried to struggle free, senselessly. They had come into the street, and the lights wavered before his eyes. There were little groups of people all along the plank sidewalk. There were a half a dozen women standing at the intersection where the street ran up toward the big houses of the mine operators, and one of them was Judith. The sight of her made him try to pull free again. Someone drove a fist into his side and he thought he cried out, though it scarcely mattered. The sound could hardly have been audible above the noise of the crowd. She couldn't have heard it. When he looked again she was out of sight. They had turned the corner so that he could see all the way down the street, past the long familiar row of saloons and bawdy houses. The livery stable was plainly visible, and under the light of the lantern a man was trying to toss a rope up over the pulley beam without success. It was only when they passed the jail on the next corner that the youthful deputy understood.

"Turn here, boys. Turn here," and then it must have dawned on him all at once. "You can't do this. It ain't lawful. I'll get the constable. You'll pay for this."

Nobody took it as anything but an idle threat. The deputy had put himself in the middle, and he lacked the size and strength to push his way out. He got carried along with all the rest, until they

dragged to a stop in front of the livery stable. Then the big miner took his gun away and pointed it at him.

"You stay here. You ain't going anywhere. He killed my little girl, and I aim to see that he pays for it."

The crowd had separated a little, but two men still clung tightly to Matt's arms. He had stopped struggling, not because he had given up, but because his body would no longer respond. He braced his legs under him, but it was only the two men who held him up.

"Listen to me," he said. His mouth felt dry and swollen, and he couldn't be sure that they would understand. "Listen. Why don't you wait? The girl's all right. She was dying. But she's not dying now. Go back and look. Wait for Doc Marriott. He'll tell you."

But they had gone beyond reasoning, and nothing he could say, no matter how eloquent, could stem them. If they backed down now they would only be admitting that all their fury and self-righteousness had been wasted. They pursued justice as heedlessly as they pursued everything else: gold, liquor, women. The man made one more try with the rope, and then a boy scrambled up into the hayloft and dropped it over the beam to him.

"Drag him over here," the miner called. "And somebody get a horse."

Matt stood waiting, and felt the first shiver go through him. The crowd had opened up to give a man room to come through with a horse. The man started through the opening, then pulled up short,

staring uncomfortably up the street. Everybody watched him. But Matt saw Judith, though she and the miner's wife had stopped, and the old constable who was coming in by himself.

Constable Hadley took a swipe at the horse as he came by and sent it rearing back into the crowd. He brought a long-barreled, old-fashioned revolver from his holster without ceremony and trained it on the miner.

"Give him his gun back," he said and, turning to the youthful deputy, "Well, that's the way it goes. This town ain't so all-fired unexciting as you gave it credit for. You didn't do too badly at that. You slowed 'em down, anyway, and gave that lady time to rouse me out of bed."

Hadley was tall, with a drooping gray mustache and long hair that folded over the collar of his frock coat. He had dressed in a hurry; he wore no shirt, but probably seldom did. There were tobacco stains on his underwear. He gave Matt a searching, critical look and swung the gun in his direction.

"You're lucky," he said. "You're lucky Miss Balfour had the sense to come and get me." He nodded at the dangling noose. "You see what you missed. But you ain't out of it yet. You're under arrest."

"Hold on!"

A buggy had pulled up at the edge of the crowd, but the old constable hadn't paid any attention to it. He turned, though, when Doc Marriott got down and bellowed at him.

"You're mighty free with your arresting, Hadley. You saved his life. But that doesn't give you

any right to point a gun at him like he was a common criminal."

The old constable didn't move the revolver. "He's not so common," he said, unfazed. "But he's a criminal, all right. I don't see any way around it."

Doc Marriott stopped near Matt and cast a slow studious glance over the crowd. He spat neatly and turned back to the constable.

"That girl's all right. You've got my professional word on that. He probably saved her life." He paused, and waved contemptuously at the miner. "Though that big hunk of brainlessness is too stupid to know it."

The old constable brushed down his mustache and studied for a while. "Maybe so. That lets him off a little easier. But he's still got somethin' to answer for. Practicin' medicine without the consent and approval of a duly constituted medical board, or some such. I seen the day when that wouldn't matter. But times have changed, and you know it as well as I do. He's in trouble, and. . ."

"Is that right?" Doc Marriott shouted, and then lowered his voice down to a near whisper. "Is that right? Well. I thought you were a friend of mine, Hadley. After treating you for all those peculiar ailments and never once letting on to anyone, your wife or anyone else. You know what I mean, don't you? This man was planning to leave this country anyway. It seems like that ought to satisfy you."

The old constable thought it over for a minute. "You say he's leaving town. Well, I get your meaning. That ought to satisfy me, all right."

He put the gun away, but kept glaring at Doc Marriott. The two men let go of Matt's arms. The crowd had started to edge away.

"Where's your horse?" the constable asked.

"Behind the store," Matt told him.

"Then I'll just go along with you." He turned to Doc Marriott. "That's all right, isn't it?" he said sarcastically.

"Yes, it's all right," Marriott said. He took Matt's hand and held it for a moment. "I'm sorry things turned out this way. Let me know where you are. Maybe someday . . ."

"Thanks, Doc," Matt said. He turned down the street, with the old constable walking close at his side. The people stood in little groups now, watching. He saw Judith on the opposite sidewalk, and stopped.

"Keep moving," the old constable said.

Matt hesitated, and went on. It was just as well probably. He had little more to say to her than he'd had before. An expression of gratitude. A simple good-by. A few impotent words that would end up in cruelty and anger. He owed her something; she had probably saved his life. She owed him something, too, that she could never pay. She was still standing there when he came back into the street, leading the two pack horses. Then she was gone, the lights of the town faded, and the mountains rose up dark ahead of him.

12

Brett Wilder saw Judith on the sidewalk and at first tried to avoid her. He was in no mood to talk to anyone. What luck he'd been having lately! All of it bad. If that drunken fool had gotten the rope over that beam the first or second try, there wouldn't have been time for anyone to bring the marshal. The thought of it had made him raw-nerved and testy. His own part in the evening had been handled adroitly, and it was irritating to see all that work go for nothing. Almost nothing. There was a brighter side to it. At least Kirby had been forced out of town. And it was a certain relief to be spared the sight of a man hanging. He shuddered at the notion, and turned toward the sidewalk. Judith had seen him, and perhaps he had only imagined that her glance was anything more than casual. It was more curiosity than any fear or doubt that made him change his mind about talking to her tonight.

"Hello, Judith," he said, and put his arm about her protectively. "You shouldn't be in this part of town."

She glanced along the street, as if not aware at

first of what he meant. A few men still loitered in front of the livery stable. And the rope still dangled from the beam where the boy had tossed it. She frowned and turned back to him.

"Yes, you're right, Brett. I was just going home. Will you walk with me?"

"Of course."

He went with her up past the big white houses and stopped at the gate. She seemed reluctant to go any farther. He had been right, he thought. There was something on her mind, and he waited.

"Brett."

"Yes?"

"Who turned that mob against Kirby? Was it you?"

He hesitated, wondering how much she knew. Had the miner said something to implicate him? Well, he could talk his way out of it. But allowing himself to be caught in a lie was something else again. He looked away from her, feigning embarrassment. There was one thing: she couldn't see his face, uncolored, in the bad light.

"It wasn't quite that way," he said haltingly. "I didn't think it would turn out the way it did. I hate him. But I wouldn't want to see any man hanged. It was just by luck that I noticed Kirby going into the surgery. And that big miner—I got to thinking I didn't want the same thing to happen to him that happened to me. I couldn't stand by . . ."

He let his voice break a little and turned away from her, but not enough so that he couldn't watch her from the corner of his eye. Or try. The same darkness that had helped him worked against him

now. Her face was masked in shadow. What was she thinking? He wanted more than simply her belief in what he was saying. He wanted her good will. And something more besides . . . After all, a suitable time had passed since Emily's death. And he was through with the black arm band. Standing there in the darkness he thought how cold and beautiful she was, but so unlike Emily had been; there was heat somewhere behind her composed exterior. And unlike Amy, without the weakness, the doglike devotion. He had thought her unobtainable once, and he was mistaken. Nothing ever really was.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was just bitterness. . . . I shouldn't have." And left the rest of it for her to say.

"No. I know how you must feel, Brett."

She touched his arm. He looked at her, damned the darkness now and hoped she could read the significance in his face. It was as far as he could go, for the moment. He stood motionless until her hand slipped away.

"I appreciated that," he said, and then turned and went down the street.

The Bighorn Saloon was half empty and quiet. Chad Balfour stood at the bar, drinking a beer, and Wilder went up to him. He ordered a bottle and glass without saying anything. The youth looked at him inquiringly before he spoke.

"You heard about the lynching, Brett?"

Wilder nodded. "I was there. I saw it." He gulped his drink down and stared at the youth. "And I guess you're glad he got away."

The boy fingered his glass of beer. "I don't know. If only . . . if only none of this had ever happened."

Wilder laughed bitterly. "It happened." He looked thoughtfully into the back-bar mirror. "It's not over yet. I wish I was like you. I don't forget so easily. Emily's dead. And nobody seemed to care. I did. Yes, I was there tonight. And I wish they'd hanged him."

He watched the kid through the mirror to see his reaction. But there seemed to be only the usual uncertainty. There wasn't much to work on, Wilder thought, except weakness and self-doubt. That was something. It might be usable. It never hurt to bank against the future. No matter how things had turned out tonight, some feeling of uneasiness still persisted. He had spoken the truth when he said that it wasn't over yet. Somehow he couldn't convince himself that he was through with Matthew Kirby.

He paid for the drink and touched the boy's shoulder as he turned to leave.

"It's all right, Chad. Nobody expected anything. . . ." And left the rest of it hanging, for the kid to figure out. He went outside, found his horse, and rode down the valley.

A light burned dimly somewhere inside his house. He sat outside, watching it, knowing that Amy was there, and only half thinking of her. He didn't want to see her, he knew that. She was something he could take, and take gladly, when his mood was right. It was wrong now. The uneasiness had come back, the feeling that everything was

still incomplete. Kirby was going away, but how far? He was up in the mountains now, toward Deadhorse Flat. Wilder got down and found his way into the darkened tack room. He felt his way around and took down the Winchester from the pegs on the wall, checked it for load, and went back to the stallion. He looked again at the light in the house. Well, she could wait for him, if she wanted to. He'd be glad to see her afterward. He knew, instinctively, just how he would be with her when this was all over.

Matt led the red gelding the last half mile to the cabin. The sun was up somewhere, but no light had yet come over the high ridge to the east, and it was impossible to see rocks that lay everywhere on the old wagon trail. He wanted to save the pony's feet. It wouldn't do to have the red go lame now, when he was so anxious to travel. There was a certain relief in knowing that everything was at last over.

It was still cold, and no mist had yet drifted up from the river. The cold had kept the deer up high, and now and then he could hear one of them creeping away from him. One moved somewhere behind him, and he listened. Something about the sound made him stop, but then the sound was gone, drowned out by the gelding's breathing. He thought nothing more about it. There was no light on in the cabin to show that old Jake was up, and he turned into the little lean-to stable and fumbled for a lantern.

The old man was lying in the pile of hay. The light from the lantern made him groan and turn over, and an empty whisky bottle slipped from his hand. Matt looked down at him, and couldn't help smiling. Poor old Jake. But he was peaceful now. Whatever had disturbed him, the whisky had taken care of it. Right at the moment, Matt felt closer to him than he had ever felt to anyone else.

The old man stirred and opened one eye.

"It's you," he said. "Blow out that light. Can't a man sleep?"

"It's almost dawn," Matt said. He hung up the lantern. "You pick a mighty funny place to do your sleeping in."

"I've seen worse," Jake said crossly, sitting up and scratching his head. "It's warm. And it's got somebody to talk to. It's got horses."

Matt loosened the red gelding's saddle and then eyed the old man disapprovingly. "So that's it. You talked to the horses all night. I thought they looked peaked. I told you we were pulling over the mountains today. But no, you wouldn't pay any attention. You've probably got them so worn out they couldn't pull as far as the flat."

The old man ignored the sarcasm. He slipped the whisky bottle into the hay and stood up. "So we're pullin' out today. I remember you sayin' that. But that horse of yours needs rest. Seems like tomorrow would do just as well."

Matt shook his head. "He's got plenty left in him yet. And we'll take it easy." It didn't matter how far they went the first day. It was simply a

matter of leaving the familiar behind him, getting rid of it once and for all. It had to be done. There was nothing to be gained by delaying it.

"It's your horse," Jake said, but took the red gelding's reins. "He could use some water, though. That would be all right, wouldn't it? Maybe not. I wouldn't want to spoil him on yuh."

He led the gelding to the opening of the lean-to and stopped. The river mist was drifting up across the clearing now. The old man spat the bad taste from his mouth and stood with his shoulders stooped and rounded. "Well, everything's packed," he said reflectively. "There ain't nothing left to do but water the stock and rig out the pack ponies. And turn the cabin over to the varmints They'll make some use of it, anyway. Nobody else will. This land ain't never been worth anything, and that's what makes it so hard to understand: I liked it here. Nobody to bother yuh. . . ."

He broke off abruptly and spat again. "That's what comes of gettin' old. Always lookin' back. Well, I'm through with that. We'll find another place as good. Yes, sir, maybe even better. We won't find any place at all, though, if I don't get this horse watered."

He stepped into the clearing, leading the gelding. The crack of the rifle was so sharp and unexpected that it was hard to believe that it meant anything. But the old man jerked. And the gelding, frightened, swung away from him, dragging him a little way before the old man finally let go of the reins and fell. Matt watched without moving.

For the first moment nothing of the scene registered on his brain. He was still thinking that the stock had to be watered, and the pack horses rigged out, and after that . . . It was only when he started to run that anything seemed important.

The gelding had stopped with its head lowered, blowing at the smell of blood. Matt grabbed the Winchester out of the saddle boot as he went by. He knelt down beside the old man and rested one hand on his shoulder and looked up through the trees. There was nothing to see in the mist. He turned Jake over and wondered at the old man's strange expression. It was the eyes that he noticed the most. The wound was high in the left temple, and old Jake's eyes were turned upward toward it, as though, even in death, he were still trying to see what had happened to him.

A hundred yards up the hill Matt found the place where the man had knelt down and sighted the rifle. There was a foot of old snow on the ground, just soft enough that he could move noiselessly. By the signs, he'd had to wait for a while. But not quite long enough. In the gray dawn, with the mist shrouding the clearing, he had only been able to recognize the red gelding; he hadn't bothered to recognize the man who was leading him at all. It was an easy mistake. Old Jake had been tall, and his bearing youthful. And he'd been leading a red horse. . . . It was all that was necessary.

Matt rolled a cigarette. He didn't want to go down to the job that was awaiting him below. But he'd seen all there was to see. The man had gone off

south toward the wagon road, and in places his horse had left clear tracks. One of the pony's shoes was broken, but it didn't mean anything. Not many horses that traveled the mountains had perfect shoes. Something else came more certainly to grasp. Someone had followed him—what a fool he'd been to take it for a deer sneaking off its bed ground—and the only man with a motive was Brett Wilder. There couldn't be any doubt that it was Wilder who had knelt here in the snow, waiting. It was one more score that had to be settled, a fresher one, more urgent than all the others. He looked down where the old man lay sprawled in the clearing. And it occurred to him suddenly that he was at fault for old Jake's death, at fault because Wilder had been alive to kill him. It was devious and self-pitying, and true nonetheless. Nothing was as simple as it seemed. Nothing could stand isolated, without sooner or later infecting something else. There was no good in running away. He'd tried it—he had meant to try it again not a half hour before—and look what it had cost him. Judith, the old man, his profession. They couldn't be brought back. But there was still Bret Wilder. The satisfaction from killing him would be small and petty, but it was all that he had left.

The soil was shallow in back of the clearing and Matt had nothing but a shovel to work with. He had to roll rocks down from the hillside to cover the grave and keep the coyotes away. It was almost noon by the time he had finished. The sun filtered

down through the trees without heat, but he was sweating. And tired. It seemed like weeks since he had slept.

He took the gelding into the stable and unsaddled it and went to the bench in front of the cabin to wash. The packs were stacked neatly in front of the door, and he brought them inside. The old man's belongings seemed more meager than they had before, as though death had diminished them, but he finally found what he was looking for. There was one bottle left. An Indian would have taken it to his grave, to help him along the way, wherever he was going. If it were true, old Jake would need it. There was a certain feeling of guilt to know that it would go for another use, as if the old man were watching him now. Death was never so clean and final as it seemed.

He took the bottle to the rough plank table and sat down with it. The first drink was hot and bitter. Outside a cloud had passed over the sun, and there was a feeling of storm in the air. The second drink was easier. He thought about Brett Wilder, but without any feeling of urgency now. He was going to kill him, or try, and there was satisfaction in the mere knowledge. He took another drink, a longer one this time, and fingered the little gouges in the table where the mice had chewed off the grease. The clearing was silent. There was just the stomp of one of the ponies in the corral, and the top wind that you grew used to and never heard—that was all. Old Jake had liked it that way, the silence. Well, he was going to get his fill of it. Matt raised the bottle again. An hour later, when it was

half empty, he heard the clink of a wheel on the rocks of the wagon road.

He recognized the buggy horse before he saw her. He whistled through his teeth, and then laughed, and made no move to leave the doorway. It was surprising that she had gotten that far down the road. He thought she wouldn't get any farther. He took another drink from the bottle as she finally wheeled into the clearing. He felt drunk, and it seemed of little importance that she should see him that way.

He stood watching as she drove up in front of him. He had never expected to see her again, and he couldn't help showing some of his surprise. And curiosity. He looked her over carefully, leaning forward with one hand gripping the door frame.

"So it's you. I thought . . . after the other day. . . if you think I'll give you the same satisfaction, Judith . . . If that's what you came up here for . . ."

She got down from the buggy without waiting for his help. There was no sun in the clearing, and she pulled the shawl tight around her shoulders.

"I didn't come up here for that," she said. "I'm not sure why I did come. I thought I'd be too late, that you would have already left."

Her eyes dropped to the bottle, and he smiled to indicate he had followed her glance.

"I was just having a little drink," he said. "I'd offer you one, only . . . It must have been something pretty important, to bring you all the way up here. How did you find the place?"

"I asked along the way. They knew you at Deadhorse. Can I come in? I'm cold."

He went back into the cabin and started a fire in the iron stove. She stood watching him, not saying anything. He wasn't as drunk as she probably thought he was. And it was a relief to find out that at last he didn't give a damn. When he looked up she had shifted her glance to the rough walls of the cabin.

"Well?"

"Nothing, Matt."

"I'm sorry you don't like it. What did you expect? It suits me all right. It's a long way from town. Nobody bothers me. They leave me alone. Or almost alone," he added, thinking of old Jake lying under the rocks at the back of the clearing.

He went to the table and turned the bottle. There was enough left. He wished she would leave, so that he could drink it in peace. He'd been perfectly content before, thinking of Jake and Brett Wilder, and listening to the wind in the trees.

"Well," he said, looking at her harshly. "You came here for something. What is it?"

She didn't say anything. Her face was flushed, perhaps from the heat from the stove, perhaps from embarrassment. He felt a little sorry for her, and then remembered that last meeting in the carriage house. She had hurt him, and he'd thought that she could never hurt him again. It was frightening to find out how easy it would be to let her.

"I suppose you want me to thank you for what you did last night," he said. "They would have hanged me. You saved my life. You surprised me."

He had hurt her now, and he wasn't sorry. A

little while ago, when Jake had fallen in the clearing, he'd stopped resisting the temptation for revenge. He watched her come toward him, and knew how hard a thing it was for her to do. He admired her for it. And made no move to meet her.

"Oh, Matt. I had to see you again. I didn't want to. But just knowing you might be gone . . . Last night, when I saw those men . . . I couldn't stand by, I love you." She put her hands on his chest, gripping the jacket so tightly that he could feel the collar pulling at the back of his neck. "Matt, I don't care what's happened. None of it matters. I love you. . . ."

He wasn't paying attention to what she was saying. He had heard it all before. But she had never seemed so soft and yielding. Perhaps it was the whisky; more than that, it was as much the line of finality she had drawn between them. All the other boundaries were gone. He didn't care what she thought of him. He put one arm around her and the other hand at her side so that it partly touched her breast, and kissed her. He moved the hand a little. Her lips were parted. When she spoke she hardly moved her lips away.

"You won't leave now, Matt."

"No," he said, and pulled her closer.

"I'm glad."

He kissed her again. Her body was tight against his, and he knew she felt the same urgency that he felt. He wanted her. And he wanted something else. Killing Brett Wilder wouldn't be enough. She had hurt him as much as Wilder ever had. He could never quite revenge himself for it; but even this

little bit would help. He stepped back, but still holding her firmly, and looked at her.

"I'll be around for a while, Judith," he said. "But not because of you. I'm going to kill Brett Wilder."

He let go of her and watched her face with some kind of pleasure. He thought she was going to slap him again, and like that time before he wouldn't have tried to avoid it. But she didn't move. He picked up the bottle from the table and took a long drink. He set it down again and turned to her angrily.

"What else did you expect? You could have left me alone. You, the whole lot of them. I didn't ask you to come up here. I didn't ask Wilder. But he came. And the old man's dead. I wouldn't have traded him for all of you. And he's dead."

She was silent, merely staring at him, one hand holding the shawl that had slipped from her shoulders.

"Is that what you wanted to hear?" he asked cruelly. "Well, maybe you won't come here again, because that's all you'll get."

He would have said more, but she didn't give him time. She brushed past him and went out the door, and he followed her leisurely. He watched her get in the buggy and turn the horse around.

"If you want . . . That road will be rougher going up. I could lead the horse for you."

She shook her head without looking at him.

"All right," he said. "Just be careful of the rocks. Use the brake going down the other side of them, or you'll crack the wheels. You'll tell Wilder. It

doesn't matter. I'll come looking for him tomorrow, and if I don't find him, I'll come the next day, and the day after that. I'll find him sooner or later. But you won't have to tell him. He already knows that."

She didn't answer. He watched her start up the wagon trail, and after she was out of sight he listened. In an hour he was sure she had made it safely to the main road, and he was sorry in a way. The anger was gone, leaving an emptiness, and a nagging feeling that he would like to see her again. He wouldn't. He was through with her, her misunderstandings, her pity, her love that was so trustless. All those things had hurt him, and they wouldn't hurt him any more.

He crossed the clearing to the stable and took down the Winchester rifle. It didn't need cleaning, but he would clean it anyway. It seemed appropriate. He took it toward the cabin where the bottle, what was left of it, was waiting for him.

13

"I think we ought to concern ourselves now with these production figures," Balfour was saying. But Brett Wilder nodded without listening to him. He was thinking of something else, partly wondering why Judith was late—it was well after dark now—and mostly thinking of the morning's events. He slid down farther in the stiff leather chair, feeling safe and comfortable, the light from the desk so dim on his face that Henry Balfour couldn't notice his inattentiveness. No, he had something better to think about than the facts and figures of Balfour's mine. He had Matt Kirby, and the thought was heady, like good brandy. Kirby hadn't moved, hadn't made any sign that he might try to get up. Even in that gray morning mist he had been sure that Kirby was dead.

"You're not listening, Brett," Balfour said with disapproval, and nodded at his son at the other end of the desk. "I could expect that from Chad, not from you."

"I'm sorry, sir. You're right. I wasn't listening. I was wondering what happened to Judith."

"It isn't like her," Balfour agreed. "But I shouldn't worry. Now these figures show a slight, but definite, decrease. . . ."

He stopped when he heard the buggy on the graveled driveway, and got to his feet. A minute later Judith came into the study, hesitated inside the doorway, and then crossed to the desk. Henry Balfour turned up the light.

"Well, Judith. It's after nine o'clock. I'm waiting for an explanation."

"I know. I'm sorry." She looked at Brett, and then at her brother, as though seeking help. Brett smiled at her.

"I was up on the pass," Judith said all at once. "I saw Matt Kirby."

Wilder didn't say anything. He held his mouth firm and choked back an exclamation. It wasn't possible, he thought. She meant something else, she had to. For the moment he could only watch Henry Balfour's expression, pale and stern above the glow of the lamp. Balfour stood rigid and motionless. Only his fingers moved in a restrained and methodical tapping on the desk top. His eyes never left Judith's face.

"I don't know why," she went on. "It doesn't matter now. I found out something. He blames Brett. . . . I'm not sure, there's something about a man, an old man. . . . He's dead. And he blames Brett for it. He says he's going to kill him. Tomorrow."

The fingers went on tapping on the desk top, the only sound in the room. Wilder tried to think

of something to say. Some statement was necessary, expected. They seemed to be waiting for it. "The man's a fool," he said at last.

Balfour nodded without once glancing away from Judith's face. His eyes showed no emotion. His voice was just as cold and unfeeling.

"You've gone far enough, Judith. Too far. I heard about last night. I don't condone mob violence. I approve even less of your letting yourself get mixed up in it. And now this. Well, I'll have more to say. For the moment you can go to your room."

She left without making any protest. But Chad followed her as far as the door, then turned to his father.

"That's not fair. You might have given her a chance to . . ."

He let the sentence diminish. His father's cold glance had fallen on him. "That's enough, Chad. I don't need advice from the likes of you. I suggest you go to your room also—like the women. You'll be better off there. If there's anything to be taken care of—any man's work—Brett and I can handle it."

For a moment it seemed to Brett that the boy might defend himself. His face was flushed and there was a firmness to his mouth that Brett had never seen before. But finally he turned and went down the hall. Henry Balfour waited until he heard him going up the stairs. All the while his face had never once softened; it had shown only coldness and contempt.

He turned to Brett. "I'll take care of this. I'll

see the marshal just as soon as he can get up here."

"I'm not worried, sir."

"Of course not. But be careful. I suggest that you stay in town. I suggest that you stay here. That place of yours is too isolated; it would make it too easy for him."

It was tempting, and Brett rejected it. Balfour would expect him to; he would take any other answer as a sign of cowardice.

"Thanks, sir. But I wouldn't want to impose on you. You've done enough. And I can take care of Kirby. I don't want to. It's a nasty business. But I'll do what's necessary."

Balfour came around the desk and patted his shoulder. "Do what you think is best, Brett. We're all behind you in this. When it's over—I'm partly to blame, I should have known how Kirby would turn out—I'll make it up to you."

It was hard to keep back a smile. Going toward the door, Brett was glad of the half-darkness of the hall. Later, when he had swung his horse into the road, he might have smiled, and found he had lost the feeling. It was easier to deceive Henry Balfour than he had ever expected. But Balfour was the least of his worries. Kirby could not be deceived. From what Judith had said, Kirby was through listening. And the big house out in the valley seemed especially lonely.

But he felt better once he was inside and had lighted the lamps and started a fire in the fireplace. After all, Judith had said "tomorrow." And Kirby wasn't the kind to come sneaking about in the darkness. In the daylight he could handle him, if

he had to. Not easily, not without risk. But if it ever came to that, it would be a relief to have it done with.

He poured brandy in a large snifter and sat down by the fire. The big house was silent. Outside a few cattle, the last of the summer grazing stock, could be heard lowing far down the valley. And occasionally a coyote cried from the hills. That was all. Then the sound of a horse brought him to his feet. He slipped the gun from the shoulder holster. He tried to put down the brandy glass, missed the table, and saw it drop to the floor. The horse was in the yard now. He turned off the two lamps and moved into the shadows away from the fire.

He heard the back door rattle, and remembered he had locked it, and found no relief in the thought. It wouldn't stop anyone. He knelt down and tried to see some silhouette against the upper glass of the door, but there was no light outside. He was sweating. He drew the hammer of the gun back, and trained it. His finger jerked a little, came perilously close to the fraction of necessary pressure, at the sound of Amy's voice. He swore weakly and got to his feet.

She was out of breath and there was a slash of blood across her forehead where some overhanging branch had struck her. But he didn't notice. "God damn you," he said, and turned abruptly back toward the sitting room.

He didn't remember the broken glass until he had relighted a lamp and saw it lying on the floor. He got another glass and filled it half full, this time with no intention of sniffing or sipping it.

Amy watched him silently. He ignored her and took a long drink.

"I'm sorry, Brett. What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"You heard about Kirby?"

"Of course I heard about Kirby," he said angrily. "You didn't ride all the way out here to tell me that."

"No. It's about Chad." She had only been waiting for his anger to pass. Now she came up to him, but still hesitant. "I'm frightened, Brett. Chad had a fight with father. I didn't hear it all, it was terrible. But he called Chad a coward. And a girl. And now Chad's run off. I tried to stop him. I know where he's going. He's going after Matt Kirby. He's hurt, and he thinks it's the only way he can show father wrong."

Brett swished the brandy around the sides of the glass and stared thoughtfully at it. He had thought himself ready for any showdown. And yet in those last few minutes . . . The sweat was gone, but he could feel the dampness in the places where he'd been sweating. So Chad had ridden off after Kirby. The fool. He wouldn't have a chance—except in Kirby's softness. No, there had to be another way, a better way. And only an idiot could miss it. He supposed he should feel some compunctions. He didn't. There was too much at stake.

"Well. What did you want from me?" he said, a little irritable because he had to prompt her.

"Find him, Brett. Please. If anything should happen . . . Please stop him. I couldn't bear it if he got hurt."

He was barely listening to her. He looked at his watch, and calculated that the kid had less than an hour's start.

"I'll find him," Brett said. "One way or another."

He hadn't intended to say it in quite that manner. It hadn't meant anything. But he could tell from her face that she had drawn something from it. For an instant she no longer seemed so young and gullible. But he let it bother him only briefly. He could handle her. He always had. He went to the door and held it for her, waiting.

"You'd better go home. And don't come back here until I let you know. I'll take care of everything."

But she didn't leave, even when he ignored her and went into the stable. And when he came out she was still there in the yard. He got into the saddle and tried to make out her expression in the darkness. But when she moved toward him, he nudged the stallion.

"Brett?"

"I'll get in touch with you," he said.

"Brett. Please . . ."

But the stallion was already out of the yard, and she couldn't expect him to hear her voice above the hoofbeats. Whatever had bothered her, whatever she had guessed . . . he could take care of that later. Only Kirby was on his mind now. And Chad. He wouldn't have any trouble finding the kid, he wouldn't know his way about in the mountains. Brett knew the way better. He'd been there once before.

14

The storm hit in the morning before Matt had reached the main road. It came at first as just a wind that made the gelding want to turn back, but in a little while fine snow was blowing across the mountainside. And then the flakes got larger. Everything was white by the time Matt found the ruts of the road and turned the gelding downhill again.

He thought of going back, and couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He hadn't the patience to sit in the cabin, perhaps for days, until the storm lifted. What he had told Judith—tomorrow, the next day—hadn't been the truth. He couldn't wait any longer. And the whisky was gone. It had run out early in the evening, and it had surprised him that it hadn't been enough.

There was a light burning in the store at Deadhorse Flat. Otherwise he might have missed it; the shanties down by the creek had already drifted over, and the big meadow looked like any other through the driving snow. Old Carlson waved to him from the window, and Matt went past and

found the road on the other side of the clearing. He had to leave most of it up to the horse.

Half an hour later he had come only a third of the way down the mountainside. He stopped to let the gelding blow, turning its tail into the wind and hunching down behind the collar of his coat. He wanted to smoke, and gave up the idea. His hands were too cold. He put them inside the jacket and stared out at the drifting whiteness. Nothing stirred. He heard nothing, only felt the rush of the bullet, and then later heard the rifle go off. The gelding remained motionless. It was only at the second shot that it went sideways and threw Matt to the ground.

He got to his knees and grabbed the reins quickly, and pulled himself to his feet. Something moved in the trees below him. He tried to watch it, and at the same time fumbled for the Winchester in the saddle boot. But whatever it was—whoever it was—had gone out of sight. He started to swing the gelding in front of him, and then thought better of it. Without the horse he didn't stand a chance. He got into the saddle, and then the man on the slope called to him.

"Matt. I'm coming down there. I wanted you to know."

It was Chad. Even in the wind he couldn't mistake the voice, high and adolescent and uncertain. It was a greater shock than he'd had just a few minutes before. What the hell was he doing out there? And what had the two shots meant? He stood up in the stirrups and tried to pick the youth out

among the trees. But even the trees were only gray, shapeless forms.

"Chad?" he shouted.

"I'm coming down, Matt."

"All right. Just put up the rifle."

"No."

"We can talk," Matt yelled hoarsely. "Whatever you're after, it will keep, won't it?"

He saw him then. The wind must have tricked him, because the youth came out of the trees far to the left of where the voice had seemed to come from. Matt still held the rifle in one hand and watched the pony work its way down the slope. He watched with only a little apprehension. Whatever was on the youth's mind, he could talk him out of it. Hadn't Chad always looked up to him? He was the one factor that had seemed constant when everyone else had changed . . . without hate or bitterness. Matt could only watch with awe and surprise when he saw the rifle come up. Just in time he swung the gelding and went down behind its neck, and made a run for the jack pines at the edge of the meadow. Chad's shot dug harmlessly into the snow.

Matt pulled up in the trees and listened. There was nothing to hear but the wind. Perhaps Chad had stopped. Or perhaps it was simply that his pony's steps were noiseless in the soft snow. He fingered the Winchester, and wondered when the time came what he might do with it. He couldn't kill the boy. He meant to kill Brett Wilder, but that would seem different . . . bloodless and un-

cruel. It was as though Wilder were already dead, without warmth, blood, feelings. And for himself —whatever the regrets, the bad conscience, the doubts that always came afterward, he would be glad to pay them their due. But not pay them over Chad. No, there was another way. If he could put enough distance behind him, give the snow enough time to cover his tracks . . .

Something cracked off to his right, the youth forgetting to duck one of the low-hanging branches. It was as good a time as any. Matt nudged the gelding and let it move out. There was still nothing but the wind. And nothing to see but gray and ghostly forms through the snow. Any one of them might have been Chad. But nothing happened. After five minutes he was sure he was safe. The snow was coming down harder. Looking back, he could barely see the gelding's tracks.

It seemed impossible at first to find the road again. An hour before there had been some indentations, however slight, that marked the well-worn ruts. Now there was nothing. It was only when the gelding stumbled that he found it. The signs were clear enough then, and he started down it, and almost immediately drew rein.

He had forgotten Chad. If the boy couldn't trail him this far—and certainly by now every track was filled—he would never find the road. Not without luck. And Matt couldn't leave him to that slender chance. He brought out the Winchester, and sat listening for a moment, and threw the lever. He meant to signal. His finger was on the trigger when he heard the shot.

It sounded muffled and harmless through the wind and snow, and it was hard to tell the distance. He was relieved at first, thinking Chad had understood his predicament. But the feeling didn't last. It seemed doubtful that Chad's courage would have fled so fast. And if he had really meant to signal, he would fire again. Matt waited, but no other sound came. He pulled down a dead branch and left it lying across the road, and went back toward the woods.

He saw Chad's pony first. It went plodding by, tail tucked between its legs, trying to escape the wind. Matt swung the gelding onto the pony's back trail, trying to hurry, and seeing the faint tracks diminishing. They ran out at last. But by then he had come to the meadow, and he didn't have to track any farther. It was as far as Chad had gotten. He was lying face-down, with fine flakes of snow drifting over him.

He had to get down to see the tiny hole that the bullet had made in the back of the boy's jacket. He knew what was inside. Already there was blood on the snow, held by the cold into firm little puddles. Matt eased one bent arm from under him and felt for the pulse. For a moment he failed to find it; and then it came only weakly to his finger tips. He stood up, looking around him helplessly. He could only guess at the wound, but he knew that the boy must be dying. There was only the question of time. And no way of knowing how much time he had; Doc Marriott's surgery was far away. He ran to the gelding and went back in the direction he had last seen the kid's pony.

It wasn't hard to find. It was standing under an old lightning-struck white oak, with its head down, too miserable to try to move away from him. He took the reins and led it back to the meadow. The boy didn't stir when he dragged him up and tied him across the saddle. There was hardly any blood. There would be more blood inside somewhere, and he couldn't stop it. There was no use in trying. It would only be a waste of time. And time was the one thing that he needed more than any other. He resented the few precious minutes that it took him to find the branch across the road again.

An hour later he got down and saw that the boy was still alive. It was only when he went to step back in the saddle that he noticed the sign, Karber Flat, nailed high on the tree at the side of the road. He'd seen it often enough before, and thought nothing of it, aside from recalling that he'd climbed the trail once to treat a miner for smallpox. It meant nothing else. But when he lifted the reins he let them drop again almost at once, and sat trying to remember. The miner's wife had given him a silver dollar, and tried to give him a chicken, and offered to show him the back trail to town. It was shorter—six miles, he remembered her saying—and too narrow for a wagon, but he was riding only a horse, wasn't he? But he had declined because it was fall, and the trees were beginning to turn, and he had enjoyed the way he had come.

Six miles. He turned and looked back at Chad. Six miles might mean the difference between the boy's living or dying, if anything could make any

difference at all. They might not make it. He didn't know the way past the mining camp. And it would be harder going for the horses. But he'd known all along that he'd committed himself to a meaningless gesture. This trail promised something else, a chance too slight, perhaps, but one that he couldn't ignore. He took one last look at the boy and started the gelding up the slope.

The trail was plainer than the road had been. He could only go so far across the slope before he came to a switchback where the banks were too high not to be obvious even under the snow. And down in the lower altitudes the snow was lessening. There were places where it had hardly touched at all.

But the way seemed endless. He thought he could see the ridge, and he should have known better. Once he had reached the top it was always still somewhere above him, out of sight. Finally he tied the reins of the kid's pony to the saddle horn and got down and hand-led the gelding across the rougher going. But even then the big red horse faltered and stumbled, and fell back against the lagging weight of the pony behind him. He went down on one knee, and came up again slowly, just as the ground leveled off and they saw the houses.

They came upon them suddenly, nestled in the side of the hill, but even in the short time that it took to reach them, he should have noticed that there was no smoke coming from the chimneys. He didn't notice it at all until he had stopped in front of the low, squat building that he remembered had served as a saloon and general store. He let

the reins drop and stood looking at it, wondering why it had never occurred to him that the place might be deserted now, still not believing it. There had to be some mistake. Beyond this point he didn't know the trail any longer. He had only the vaguest idea of where it even started.

He stood for a long time staring at the broken windows of the saloon, and listening to the wind whistling between the deserted houses. Then he went back and looked at Chad. The youth was still alive. But whatever damage the bullet had failed to do, he knew that cold and shock were accomplishing it. The boy's circulation was too weak and slow to ever keep him warm. And he couldn't spare his own jacket. He went to the gelding and loosened down the latigo, and slid the blanket out from under the saddle. In the cold it would leave the gelding raw and sore, but there was no help for it. He tied the blanket over the youth, and took the gelding's reins, and walked out of the settlement. He couldn't remember anything the woman had said, if she had given him any directions at all. It didn't matter. He couldn't hope to find the trail. He was only sure that Colbyville lay somewhere to the south.

The way down from the ridge was steeper. But it had stopped snowing, and the country had begun to open up. The big pines had given way to dogwood and alder and a few solitary oaks that marked the lower altitudes. It didn't mean anything, of course, to simply be lower down the mountain. He no longer knew which direction was south. There was no sun, and the landmarks

that had been obscure in the snow had become meaningless without it. They told him nothing. He went slanting along the mountainside, only thinking of each new step, sometimes feeling the gelding come up on him, and knowing that if the horse stumbled he wouldn't have the strength or quickness to get out of its way. He no longer thought about the boy. It no longer seemed important whether he was alive or dead. It had become like a technicality, petty and bothersome and without any true relation to the purpose. Merely getting him there was all that seemed to matter. And wasn't that all he had expected? He had never really thought that he would save Chad's life. And when he passed through the little stand of jack pine and looked below, it was as though he had passed judgment on the boy himself. It had snowed very little this far down the mountain, and there was no mistaking the wagon road's familiar contours. He swung around and stumbled back toward the kid.

It took a long time for him to feel the throb of the pulse through his numb fingers. But it was there, steady and hopeful. He got into the saddle and urged the gelding into a trot. He recognized the country now. Below him was the last slope.

The clock in the window of the saddle shop said two-thirty when he turned at last into the main street. In the cold there were few people about. But a boy of about twelve came out of an alley and followed Chad's pony at a discreet distance. And up at the Bighorn Saloon a man paused with his hands

on the batwings and called something inside. By the time he reached the corner a half dozen men had formed on the sidewalk. They came out to meet him.

"What's happened? What yuh got there?"

He tried to go around them, but one man put his hand absently on the gelding's reins. He recognized some of them, probably he had met them casually in the street. But one man's face was more familiar than the rest. He remembered it from the night of the lynching.

"What yuh got back there?" the man said, jerking his head toward the kid's pony.

"It's Chad Balfour. He's been shot," Matt said, and tried to lift the gelding's head.

But the man kept a firm grip and stared up at him. "Shot, eh? How'd it happen?" And then his eyes widened, and he lost interest in everything but Matt's face. "Say, ain't you the fella we run out of here? Sure you are. And now you've come back. Well . . ."

He turned and called to the boy. "Come here, son."

The boy started to go backward and then thought better of it. He came ambling across the street, avoiding the mud puddles and watching sullenly out of lowered eyes. The man holding the reins shouted at him.

"You'll have to move faster than that. Run and find the marshal and tell him what's happened. Then skedaddle up to Mr. Balfour's, the big white house at the end of the street, and tell him his boy's

been shot. Tell him we're holding the fella that done it."

Matt had worked loose one button of the long coat. He reached under the skirt and brought out the gun and trained it at the man's head.

"There's something else he has to do first," he said. "You seem to be giving orders. Give him this one. I want him to run up to Doc Marriott's and tell him I'm coming in with a dying man, and to get ready for him. Tell him I'm in a little trouble, but I don't expect it to slow me down. He can deliver your other messages after that."

The man hesitated, and Matt pulled back the hammer of the Colt.

"All right," the man said quickly. "You heard what I told yuh. Go see the Doc. And don't forget the rest. Skedaddle."

He watched the boy run up the street. Then he turned to Matt. "If you think . . ."

"There's something else," Matt said. "I'm going through to the Doc's, like I told the boy. I don't want any trouble. I want you to let go of those reins."

The man turned and looked at his companions.

"They can't help you," Matt said. "You've got just one more second. Then nobody will be able to help you at all."

The man let go of the reins and took a short step aside, not far enough. Matt turned the gelding against him and threw him into the mud. He sprawled, started for his gun holster, and then went back on his elbows. Matt kept the gun on him un-

til he had turned the corner and had gone out of sight.

Doc Marriott was waiting for him at the back door of the surgery. He helped him untie the boy from the saddle.

"Who is it, Matt?" he asked, and then they turned him over to carry him inside. "My God, it's Chad. What happened?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "He tried to pick me off, up on the pass. Somebody got him first."

"My God, the young fool," said Marriott as he went backward into the surgery, stumbling under the boy's weight.

"Not on his back," Matt said, and they turned him again and laid him face down on the table. Mrs. Trumbull stood in the corner, heating instruments, as stern-faced and efficient and unyielding as ever.

"Everything's ready," she said, without glancing in Matt's direction.

"You'll have to get out of those clothes first," Doc Marriott said.

"I'm dry enough. If I can just get my hands warm . . ."

"You're dripping water all over the surgery. I'll give you another shirt, anyway. It won't fit. . . . Trumbull, see that the boy's undressed." He pushed Matt out into the hallway.

In the old doctor's bedroom Matt changed his shirt and tried to rub some of the warmth back into his hands. Marriott watched him studiously.

"The scrubbing will take care of your hands.

There can't be much of a hurry anyway, by the looks of that boy. . . . Does anybody else know about this?"

"The whole town by now. That kid was on his way to Balfour's. They'll be down here. You can count on that."

The old doctor scratched his nose thoughtfully. "Yes, I guess I can. I don't need you to figure it out for me. And you think you're going to save that boy's life with those fools howling down your neck. . . . Well, you're wrong. You'd be smart to pull out. You're through around here. I didn't think it would ever come to that, but it's true. This is one operation where I don't need your help. It wouldn't do any good. The boy's going to die anyway."

"I can save him, Doc."

"You're as big a fool as the rest of them. And maybe you're right, maybe you can. If you ever had the chance. You won't. There's somebody at the front door now, and you don't have to be any smarter than you are to know who it is."

"I know," Matt said. He went out into the hall and waited while Marriott opened the door. Henry Balfour and Judith came into the waiting room.

"Where's Chad?" Balfour demanded. "If anything's happened . . ."

"He's in the surgery," Marriott interrupted him. "And he's not fit to see anybody, especially you. If you want to sit down and wait . . ." He motioned to the chairs at the side of the room. But Balfour didn't move.

"Don't lie to me, Marriott. I know what's going on. Kirby's here, and I want to see him. Right now. I won't ask you again."

"You haven't asked at all. And it won't do you any good a second time. He's not here."

"You're lying, Marriott. And you'll pay for it. I'll give you just . . ."

"You won't give me anything. And don't waste your threats on me, either. I haven't got time to listen to them. There's a sick boy in there. . . ."

"It's no use, Doc," Matt said from the hallway. "He wouldn't believe the truth, he won't believe a lie." He walked out into the waiting room, not looking at Judith, and faced Henry Balfour.

"You heard what Doc said, Mr. Balfour. There isn't much time. I'm going to operate on your boy. If there was any other way . . ." He paused and looked at Doc.

"There isn't," Marriott said. "Maybe I could have done it once. I can't now. There's too much I never learned, and even more I've forgotten."

Matt watched Balfour's face, and it seemed that the man hadn't been listening. There was perhaps for a moment a look of desperation in his eyes, but it was gone too quickly to be sure that it had ever existed. His eyes became hard and unyielding again. Matt turned and started down the hallway, and heard Balfour come after him. He pulled out the Colt and swung back angrily.

"That's far enough," Matt said, half-shouting. "Look," and he glanced down at his hand, and both he and Balfour could see it shaking. "That's

how far you've come, Balfour. If you want to live, don't come any farther."

Balfour took a step back. "You'll pay for this," he said quietly. "You're a murderer, Kirby. First Emily. And now my boy. I'll see you hung. You won't have any help this time."

"All right," Matt said. He looked down at his hand again, and it was steady now. He turned and went through the door of the surgery.

Doc Marriott came in a moment later, and went over to the table. There was only a sheet over the boy now. The old doctor bent over the wound. The boy coughed and a little blood-tinged sputum dropped on the clean white cover of the table. Marriott straightened up and looked at Matt.

"Well?"

"I don't know," Matt said. He shook the water from his hands and took the towel that Mrs. Trumbull offered him. He wiped his hands slowly and studied the boy. It was ironical, after all the threats and arguments, how doubtful he felt now. The feeling hadn't passed by the time Marriott was through scrubbing.

"Probe," he said to Mrs. Trumbull, and went over to the table.

Marriott followed him. "You expect to find it with that?"

"No," Matt said, and already he had inserted the probe into the wound. "It was a rifle bullet. It must have been. It would have gone deeper."

It wasn't necessary to look, but just to feel, to wait for the signals that might transmit themselves

to his fingers. It was precious little to go on. He stopped once, and worked the probe back and forth, and Marriott glanced at him inquiringly.

"Muscle," Matt said. He withdrew the probe and dropped it on the instrument tray. He hadn't really expected to find anything so soon. He picked up a scalpel and studied the boy's pale, unconscious face.

"Will you take his pulse, Mrs. Trumbull?"

He waited while the woman found the boy's pulse. He looked at Marriott, and shook his head. "I wish I knew. That bullet should have gone right through him."

"I never saw one that didn't."

"Unless," Matt said, and picked up the probe again. Almost immediately he found what he wanted, the rough edge of bone. He withdrew the probe and dropped it back on the table.

"That's it," he said. "It had to be. That bullet must have glanced off one of the lower ribs, and ended up in the gut. It's the only thing that could have stopped it."

"You're sure?" Marriott said skeptically.

"What else? If I'm right, we haven't got time to explore any further. You know what will happen if peritonitis sets in."

"I know what will happen anyway," Marriott said. "You're taking a chance. And with those fools waiting for you out there."

"Help me turn him over," Matt said. He glanced at Mrs. Trumbull.

"Weak and unsteady," Mrs. Trumbull said. "You want the chloroform now?"

"Not until we need it. If he wakes up." He picked up the scalpel and made the first slice down the abdomen. He cut again, carving through the thin layer of fat. Marriott applied the hemostats without hesitation, and together they pulled back the incision. Even without sponging up the blood, they could see that Matt was right. The bullet had torn through several lengths of small intestine.

It wasn't important to locate the bullet any longer. He would only take it out if it was easily found. He used more sponges to decrease the flow of blood, and took the suture from Mrs. Trumbull, and began to tie off the bleeding vessels. When he was finished he stepped back to take a breath and look down at the open wound.

The worst was yet to come, and Marriott knew it. He shook his head. "My God, you'll never get that back together again. That bullet tore up every last inch of gut."

"Some of it will have to come out. We can fix the rest, if he can stand it."

The boy moved as if in response to the words, and immediately Mrs. Trumbull slipped the cone over his face. Matt watched the drops of chloroform for a second, then bent down again. He worked quickly, his mind vacant, everything concentrated in his fingers. It was pure mechanics now, nerveless, and for its own sake, not the boy's. Any thought of pity or doubt might bring the trembling of fear to his fingers. Sweat was his only concession. He could feel a drop run down his forehead, and he straightened up too late. He caught it on his wrist. Marriott wiped his forehead and

threw the towel into the corner of the room. Matt turned to Mrs. Trumbull.

"We'll need drains," he said. "Three of them." He was almost finished now. He had only to insert the drains and sew up the incision, and wait. It took but a few minutes. He dropped the needle on the table and stood looking at the boy's flat white belly. Mrs. Trumbull felt for the pulse again. Doc Marriott let out a long, labored sigh.

"You don't have to do that, Trumbull," he said. "I can tell you what it is. Still weak, but steadier. I've been in this business long enough to know that much, anyway. No, that boy's going to live unless peritonitis sets in. I wouldn't have believed it."

Matt smiled. "It's a little early to say, isn't it?"

"No. I can tell. I'm not a surgeon, not like you. But there're some things I know. It's nothing I ever learned in books or college, but I can tell."

Matt shrugged, still smiling, and the old doctor fixed him with a withering glare. "I wouldn't be too proud of myself. Sure, the boy's going to live, but only you and I know it. Nobody else is going to believe it. Not Henry Balfour. I could try to talk to him, but . . ."

"No," Matt said. "It wouldn't do any good. I'll talk to him myself, but not now. There's something else I've got to do first."

"Wilder?"

"That's right, Wilder. It's been a long time due. I just never saw it before, that's all."

"All right. I'll get your coat."

He came back a moment later. "They're all out there," he said. "The marshal, and a couple of

deputies, and half the bums in town. I didn't see Wilder, though."

He went to the window and drew the curtain. "Funny. There's no one out there now. There was somebody a few minutes ago. You'd think they'd be watching for you to pull out the back way."

"They figure I can't get very far," Matt said thoughtfully. "I hope I don't have to. He was behind me in the mountains. And I took a short cut." He looked at his watch. Five o'clock. He couldn't have timed it better. Wilder might be pulling into the street this very minute. It was strange, after all the events of the afternoon, how little they had changed his mind or feelings. They were just as constant and bitter.

"Well, I'll try to hold them off," Marriott said.

"Thanks, Doc. You can tell Balfour I'll be back. If I'm not . . . There's only one thing that will stop me, and that ought to satisfy him."

"All right," Marriott said. He rubbed his nose and looked at Matt inquiringly. "You want me to tell Judith anything?"

Matt paused. But there really wasn't a thing. He opened the door and went out into the alley. It was almost dark. The reins of the kid's pony were still tied to the gelding's saddle, and the two horses had wandered a ways up the alley, sniffing for spilled grain under the board fences. Matt hitched the pony and got into the saddle. At the corner something moved, and his hand went down to the gun holster.

"Matt."

It was Judith, and he was afraid her voice would

attract someone from the front of the house. He drew the gun and kept moving. She started toward him and he reined up, still with the gun drawn, not looking at her, glancing up and down the alley.

"Please, Matt."

He sat waiting, nervous and tense. It was dark where he had stopped, and she was wearing a white dress, but he couldn't see her face. He quieted the gelding and looked down at her in the darkness.

"Judith, there isn't anything . . ."

"Please, Matt." She touched his leg as she might have put her hand to his mouth to stop him from talking. "I know what you're going to say. They're waiting for you at the front of the house, but I knew you'd come out this way. I know what you have to do. I just wanted you to know . . ."

The gelding threw its head and side-stepped.

"Please, Matt. Listen to me. I didn't mean what you think when I said they were waiting for you. Amy's there too. You know what that means. Oh, Matt, you knew all along and I wouldn't listen to you. She's told everything. She tried to follow Brett into the mountains last night, to stop him. She knew what he meant to do."

Her hand still touched his leg, but now she let it fall. "I know, Matt," she said wearily. "I know how you must feel. I just wanted—if it would make any difference to you now—I just wanted you to know, that's all. I'm sorry, Matt. It isn't any good, but I'm sorry."

He sat looking at her, then reached out a hand and touched her hair. It was more like patting a dog than any gesture of affection, but it was all that

he could manage now. He wasn't sure what he felt, besides pity for her; she had been hurt as much as he had, in her own way, and it didn't matter now who was to blame. He would know how he felt later, when the other feeling, the hatred that was like poison, was gone. He couldn't tell anything until then.

"You'll come back, Matt?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll be back," he said, and lifted the reins.

"If you want me to . . . I'll wait for you. Here. I'd like to."

She tried to take his hand, but he didn't see it in the darkness. He was already turning away from her, already thinking of something else. He went down the alley as far as the livery stable, and then turned into the main street.

There was a horse standing outside of the back door of Wilder's house, a black stallion with the saddle still on and a line of froth along its neck and around its belly. It was too tired to nicker at the gelding or raise its head. There was a light burning somewhere inside. Matt pulled back in the shadows and waited. Once or twice Wilder passed by the window. Then the house sank into darkness, and he came out.

But some sixth sense made Wilder stop with the screen door pushed out and his hand still on the knob of the back door. He stood listening. The gelding fidgeted, and the screen door made a gentle creaking sound as it swung back. Matt took out the Colt.

"Wilder," he said.

It was too dark to make out anything but the

dim outlines of the house. He waited for the muzzle flash of Wilder's gun. He fired at it, and Wilder made a little moaning sound, and the door swung back with a crash. Matt got down from the saddle and started slowly across the yard.

There was no sound. Nothing seemed to move, and he thought with a little awe and surprise how well that one shot had taken. A lucky shot. And already his nerves were letting down, giving way to the inevitably numb and empty aftermath. Then something made a sound deep in the house, a lamp chimney toppled from its base. Matt went up the stairs at one stride. He threw open the screen door and stepped quickly out of the way.

Nothing happened. The toe of his boot touched something soft on the floor, and it took him a minute to realize that it was wet clothing that Wilder had dropped there. Wilder had meant to ride into town looking fresh and neat and innocent. It was something to know that he wouldn't look that way any more.

Matt felt his way along in the darkness. It might be better to wait, he knew . . . in a strange house any accidental sound would give him away. And he couldn't wait. He felt his way through the sitting room . . . he felt the bricks of the fireplace, and his knee came against the couch where Emily had lain bleeding, he remembered that, and he knew he'd been right about the lamp chimney . . . glass crunched softly under his boot. Then a board creaked in the floor above him, and he groped for the banister and started up the stairs.

There was a hall at the top and he turned down

it, his back flat against the wall. There was nothing to hear. He stopped, tense and indecisive, and a sudden shudder ran up his spine. It wasn't fear. He felt the draft on his face, cold and unmistakable, and he turned to follow it.

Once he was in the bedroom he could see what had happened. There was a snow door at the end of the room, an exaggerated precaution against the low country storms, and it was open . . . the outside darkness was lighter gray beyond it. Matt felt his way through the furniture of the room and looked down, and saw nothing. There was a window in the other wall, and he stumbled toward it, anxious and cursing. But from the window he could see the black stallion, and as he watched he saw Brett Wilder come around the corner of the house.

He raised the gun and tapped gently at the window, and knocked out the glass. For a full second Wilder stood poised without looking up. Then he lifted his head, and the gun in his hand jerked twice, and the bullets made a distant whining sound into the darkness. He started toward the horse, stopped again for some reason only he would ever know, and Matt leveled the Colt and fired. The shot drove Wilder to his knees and toppled him sideways. One leg was twisted. He straightened it out and rolled over on his back and lay quietly.

He lay in the same position when Matt found his way back into the yard. There was a little blood at the corner of his mouth that was hard to see, but the stallion could smell it readily enough. The big horse had turned end-to at the hitching

rack and was watching him. Matt watched him too, but only for a moment. The satisfaction lasted only that long. He listened to the coyotes in the hills and thought of burying him. But he wouldn't. Not now. It would take the coyotes a long time to sniff him out and work up their courage. And she was waiting for him. All the poison was gone, he was drained of it, the bitterness and hatred, and it left him room for what he felt for her.

It was something to see when he turned back into the alley. . . . The light in Doc's little surgery was still on and she was waiting for him under it, not bothering about the shadows any longer.

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